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Mainstreaming Martina: representing lesbians in the '90s

Valerie Leila Armstrong

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming Martina: representing lesbians in the '90s

Valerie Leila Armstrong

In this thesis I address the proliferation of representations of lesbians in North American mainstream media in the early to mid-1990s. Through a focus on a specific object/subject, Martina Navratilova, I investigate the discourse of progressiveness which accompanies this proliferation. As well, I argue that the shift in the way lesbians are being represented is indicative of a new cultural approach to lesbian sexual difference. This approach, "a homosexuality of no importance" (D. A. Miller), is a strategy of partaking of, and enjoying, lesbian difference while at the same time denying its importance and relevance. My theoretical analysis is conducted within the terrain of lesbian/feminist and "queer" theories of gender and sexual identity, lesbian feminist writings on visibility and representation, and recent Marxist and feminist writings on women in sport. A discussion of the conditions, or terms, of lesbian visibility in mainstream media is key to my analysis.

**For my mother, Margaret Valerie Armstrong,
who has always valued my education.**

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Introduction: Contextualization

In "What Becomes A legend Most," Martha Gever writes

As of 1993, lesbians are no longer "the invisible homosexuals" . . . According to the mass media, the entry of lesbians into "our collective consciousness" – "out of the closet and in your face" – means we've finally conquered their domain: lesbians can now become legends (209).

In recent years there has been a shift in the way lesbians are being represented in North American mainstream media.¹ This shift has occurred at two levels: first, there has been a marked increase in the number of representations of lesbians and second, the media's "framing" of lesbians has changed significantly. By lesbians, I am referring to women who are identified as lesbian, as well as women whose sexuality is being speculated upon (i.e., their lesbianism is implied), but this shift can also be seen in the increase, and attempted integration, of lesbian characters in films and on television sit-coms and dramas.

While the sheer amount of coverage, and its apparently positive nature, might suggest that dominant cultural attitudes towards lesbians have improved, equating increased visibility with a positive shift in societal attitudes is far too simple. Although this statement might seem obvious, lesbian and gay, as well as mainstream, media continue to repeat this discourse of "progressiveness" and acceptance around these representations. The idea is that society in general is ever moving towards being more inclusive and respectful of sexual difference and that representing lesbians (or lesbian characters) in a non-overtly homophobic way is evidence of social advancement. For example, the February, 1996 issue of *Curve* contains an article titled "Rants and Raves of

¹ I am referring to American and Canadian English language media, i.e., prime-time television, popular magazines, syndicated newspapers, etc..

'95" (54-55) in which columnist Michele Fisher lists "Lots of new lesbian characters on TV" under the category of raves. What Fisher fails to recognize is firstly, that more is not necessarily better and, secondly, that non-overtly homophobic content does not necessarily equal lesbian positive-images.

This change in the way lesbians are being represented, and the discourse of "progressiveness" which surrounds it, together form the site of my inquiry. Within this site I want to trace a specific discursive shift which accompanies these representations. Gever hints at this shift in the quote with which I opened this chapter: "As of 1993," lesbians have moved from being "the invisible homosexuals" to being part of "our collective consciousness." She argues that, while the mainstream media proclaims the arrival of lesbians into "our collective consciousness," it eschews any history of previous representations and, instead, purports to embrace "the invisible homosexuals" as "chic."² An example of this can be found in the September 8, 1995 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* in which a sub-title boldly announces that "A Once Invisible Group [i.e., homosexuals] Finds The Spotlight" (20).

The point Gever is making is that, in spite of the idiom that lesbians were "the invisible homosexuals" prior to the "progressive" and inclusive 1990s, lesbians have long be represented within the dominant conceptual scheme. One may look towards any number of articles or books by film scholars on

² I am using chic here to refer to "lesbian chic" – a phrase coined by the mainstream media (see *New York* magazine, May 10, 1993) to describe the sudden fashionability of lesbians and lesbianism.

lesbians in film to see that this is indeed the case.³ Further to this line of reasoning, Gever argues

Lesbian culture . . . which the mass media claims to have discovered a couple of months ago, has developed in full view of Western society over the past century: dominant society just hasn't *seen* lesbian culture in ways that suggest continuities between past images of deviants and perverts and present images of apparently self-defined women (210).

For the purpose of my project, I extend this analysis and add that mainstream media does not *represent* lesbians in ways that suggest continuities between past media representations of deviants and perverts and present media representations of lesbians as the latest cultural novelty. The mythical invisibility of lesbians allows for the creation and perpetuation of still another myth: the acceptance of lesbian sexual difference within the dominant conceptual scheme.

Gever identifies the move from lesbians being "framed" as outside of mainstream representation, or as invisible, to lesbians being "framed" as inside of mainstream representation, or part of "our collective consciousness." However, she does not pursue this shift any further, nor does she ask what it means to become part of "our [i.e., heterosexual, mainstream] collective consciousness." Admittedly, such a question is not a part of her project, but pursuing this point further provides a route to contextualizing current representations of lesbians in mainstream media.

³ It is not as though lesbians have a history of mainstream representation in films alone. Lesbian characters appeared in '70s and '80s prime-time television dramas such as *Police Woman* and *Hill Street Blues* and lesbian-themed novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Rita Mae Brown's semi-autobiographical coming out story *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) have were widely distributed and enjoyed a substantial heterosexual readership prior to the 1990s. In addition, Martina Navratilova's auto-biography *Martina*, co-written with George Vecsey, spent ten weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list in the mid-eighties.

Central to Gever's argument is her discussion of visibility as dependent on cultural conditions. She explains,

If all images or representations are culturally generated, then our very ability to see them is dependent on cultural forms and conditions: visibility is not a property essential to images, but is constituted culturally. Thus there can be no ideology-free window through which lesbians can be seen (210).

This particular focus works well with my attention to the conditions of lesbian visibility within the dominant conceptual scheme. I argue that the recent proliferation of representations of lesbians is indicative of a new cultural approach to lesbian sexual difference: a strategy of partaking of, and enjoying, lesbian difference while at the same denying its importance and relevance. In other words, I argue that lesbian visibility in the 1990s is a conditional visibility and that one of the most significant conditions of this visibility is that it circulate within a discourse of "a homosexuality of no importance" (Miller, 122).

"A homosexuality of no importance," is a key interpretive and analytical tool for my project and I elaborate on its origins, as well as how and why I am using it, in Chapter 2. This discourse provides a means to understand how mainstream media's apparent attention to, and enjoyment of, lesbian sexual difference works along with its contradictory denial of the relevance of this difference. Because this approach is a change from previous approaches of abhorrence mixed with bizarre fascination, mainstream media, as well as lesbian media, proclaim its overall "progressiveness" without addressing who actually benefits from this so-called advance. In the following chapters, I question the validity of this claim by addressing the recent proliferation of images of lesbians as a move from representing lesbians as "invisible homosexuals" to representing lesbianism as "a homosexuality of no importance." In short, I want to question not just what is involved with this shift,

but also the purported benefits for lesbians of moving from "non-existence" to "non-importance."

One way that this shift takes place is when the mainstream media positions presumed-to-be-straight viewers/readers as being "in the know" when it comes to lesbian sexual difference. I argue that, in this way, the relevance of lesbian sexual difference is managed from a straight point of view and in fact, the "knowledge" of lesbian difference becomes knowledge for and about heterosexuals. My claim is partly derived from Eve Sedgwick's arguments in "Epistemology of the Closet." As I explain in Chapter 2, Sedgwick shifts attention from those who inhabit "the closet" to those in the heterosexual community that derive pleasure from "knowing" who is "in" and who is "out." She further argues that it is heterosexuals who are invested in maintaining "the closet" because of the role homosexuality plays in defining heterosexuality. As well, Sedgwick makes a connection between knowledge and sexual knowledge and points out that to be "in the know" is to be, first and foremost, sexually knowledgeable.

A recent CBC television movie, *X-Rated*, provides an excellent example of how Sedgwick's points support my approach. In 1994, the makers of *Degrassi High* produced *X-Rated*, the pilot film for the CBC series *Liberty Street*. *X-Rated* focuses on a group of twenty-somethings (two bike couriers, a couple of kitsch collectors, an eco-warrior, a single mother, a former drug addict, etc.) who live together in a converted warehouse building in Toronto. During the film, a gay, native-Canadian bike courier "comes out" to a young, white, straight woman who has asked him to be her room-mate. He wants her to know he is gay before he accepts the offer but, when he says "I'm gay," she replies "No shit, Sherlock." Of course she already knows he is gay because she is tough, worldly and hip. But what this scene neglects is the relevance of

the gay character's process of naming, his self-identification, the importance of what his gayness means to him. Instead his homosexuality is reduced to what it means to the young, white, straight woman – and to her, it does not matter.

Although this example is of a gay male character disclosing his homosexuality to a straight, female character, it resonates with the treatment of lesbian characters. The straight female character in *X-Rated* is concerned with what she already "knows" – that the gay character's homosexuality is not important – and this "knowledge" forecloses on his opportunity to explain what he means when he says "I'm gay." Another, more recent example of how "unimportant" homosexuality has become to those who are "in the know" can be found in the January 23, 1996 issue of *The Advocate*. In "The Year in Interviews," Roseanne is quoted as saying: "I talked to my real-life kids, and I said, 'If you tell me you're gay, I plan to be really bored. If you tell me you're going to be a Republican, I shall be shocked'" (12). It is unfortunate that Republicans do not find homosexuality as boring as Roseanne does.

This discourse of acceptance, and even boredom, is not only inconsistent with the current trend of lesbians as cultural novelties, but is also difficult to reconcile with the continuing lived-oppression of lesbians and gays. The case of Martina Navratilova makes this point clear. How unimportant is her lesbianism when her retirement from singles play in November of '94, brought 500 requests for interviews but very little response from corporate sponsors. As Navratilova herself notes: "George Forman goes into the ring and gets 100 requests for endorsements, but nobody's calling me" (Finn, "Fearless," 13). Navratilova makes a strong case study for my thesis because of the contradiction between Navratilova's famous, visible lesbianism and the discourse of "a homosexuality of no importance" as well as the contradiction between the impediment to Navratilova's endorsements and the discourse of

progressiveness towards lesbian sexual difference. Furthermore, Navratilova is a locus where contradictory discourses on women in sport and lesbians in the media intersect.

By focusing on this specific discourse object/subject – Martina Navratilova – I question two assumptions that accompany the new representational strategy towards lesbians: first, the belief that, until recently, lesbians were "invisible" (or absent) from mainstream media; and, second, the view that representing so-called "marginal" groups, specifically lesbians, within the mainstream is necessarily an improvement. I have chosen Navratilova as the site of my investigation because she has been represented – as a female athlete, a lesbian, a public persona and as the focal point of media speculation, innuendo and scandal – in mainstream media for over two decades. Her continual presence in the media and her well documented history serve to help trace the shift in the way lesbians are being represented. For example, such a history dispels any claim that prior to the 1990s lesbians were invisible or absent from mainstream representation. Furthermore, the conditions of Navratilova's visibility are imbricated in her history and cast doubt on the link between increased visibility and "public acceptance."

One major condition of Navratilova's visibility is her lack, or loss, of endorsement earnings (the bread and butter of professional athletes). Although she has been hired to represent Lotto, The New York Times, L. A. Eyeworks and Apple in recent years, overall Navratilova has received very few endorsement offers. As well, Lotto's decision to drop Navratilova for Boris Becker in 1994 is highly suspect and can not simply be chalked up to gender bias. Becker's career is in no way comparable to Navratilova's 167 titles, 19 of which were grand slam titles, including nine Wimbledon singles wins and a 74 match unbeaten streak in 1984. And while Navratilova is frequently referred to

in mainstream media "as one of the greatest of female athletes" (Bricker, E1), or "the finest woman athlete to grace her sport" (Finn, November 16, 1994, B11), similar claims are rarely made about Becker's status as a male athlete.

My point certainly is not to argue for or against any athlete's "greatness" but, as Laura Vecsey writes in an article published in *The [Montreal] Gazette*,

Could you imagine Nike pulling the plug on Michael Jordan? Nolan Ryan is now selling a pain reliever in a TV campaign that also features Ryan's son. Converse, in an act of good conscience, honored Magic Johnson's contract after he disclosed he was infected with the HIV virus. You are as big as you are marketable. Or as marketable as you are big (D6).

It would appear as though, regardless of the recent popularity of lesbians and lesbianism in mainstream media, the so-called greatest female athlete of all time is not big enough nor marketable enough for corporate sponsors.

In an article published in *The New York Times* at the time of Navratilova's retirement, Robin Finn writes

On a personal front, [Navratilova] regrets nothing, particularly not her decision to defy the advice of managers and establishment types for the sake of a better image and bigger clout in the market place.

"I was advised to put men in the friends' box at Wimbledon, but I couldn't live with myself if I put up a front like that," she said (D6).

This quote suggests that it was Navratilova's decision to sacrifice her image, and the money that might have been attached to that image. But, although a pretense of heterosexuality may have equaled more earning potential, the rumors about her sexuality marked Navratilova as a lesbian – and thus taboo to corporate sponsors – long before she had an opportunity to "come out" on her own terms and certainly long before lesbianism became a "hot" cultural commodity.

I do not want to imply that Navratilova is powerless or has no control of her own image. Rather, I am suggesting that she has had to negotiate her image with mainstream media and in terms of the "public's" understanding of, and response to, her sexuality. Thus, we see Navratilova move from attempts to "femme-ify" her image in the mid-1980s to sporting a less traditionally feminine look in the 1990s.

Navratilova is amazingly adept at surfing the waves of media representation and "public" reaction, particularly in the 1990s where such negotiation involves taking into account two contrasting, but co-existing discourses on lesbian sexual difference: first, the assertion that lesbianism simply does not matter and second, the ever-present and ever-oppressive voice of the moral majority. It is interesting to note that, unlike other celebrity "out" lesbians, Navratilova places herself in opposition to both discourses by being politically outspoken around issues of gender and sexuality. As pointed out in an interview in the October 5, 1993 issue of *The Advocate*:

When Magic Johnson announced his heterosexual exploits along with the fact that he was HIV-positive, Navratilova decried the double standard that allows male athletes to sleep around with impunity while females would be tarred as sluts. She also didn't want anyone to forget that if Johnson had been gay, the public would have been far less forgiving (Kort, 46).

Other "out" lesbian celebrities have been careful to avoid political platforms that strike too close to home, preferring to support non-lesbian and gay organizations such as People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). However, recently even PETA has proven too contentious and potentially career damaging for two dyke divas. In a 1994 CBC special, coinciding with the launch of her album *all you can eat*, kd lang stated that she regrets making the "inflammatory" statements in her controversial "Meat Stinks" commercial for PETA (1990). Melissa Etheridge is also busy backpedaling, referring to her

PETA anti-fur ad with partner Julie Cypher (1995) as "my mistake" (Wieder, 68).⁴ lang's and Etheridge's refusal to make an issue of their lesbianism, although understandable, allows the media to fit the two comfortably within the discourse of "a homosexuality of no importance." Although such a fit for Navratilova is difficult at best, one has to wonder how (and why) she is able (and willing) to go where lang and Etheridge fear to tread.

* * *

In order to explain the trajectory of this thesis, I need to explain how this research project came into being. My initial interest was around the two-fold issue of lesbian visibility. First, as Gever explains during the 1980s, lesbian communities with diverse interests were able to come together around the political project of increased visibility. Second, in the early 1990s, with the proliferation of representations of lesbians, the mainstream media caused some lesbian activists and theorists to reconsider increased visibility as a collective goal. At the same time, mainstream media, as well as many lesbians, lauded representations of lesbians in mainstream media as evidence of social progress. Coming from a background as an activist and as an avid consumer of popular culture, I wanted to explore the contradictions between 1) the project of increased lesbian visibility and a realization of this project by mainstream media and 2) the celebration of increased lesbian visibility in mainstream media and the critique of these representations. In short, my research focus is directed towards the terms of lesbian visibility, i.e., who sets

⁴ These examples seem to suggest that being politically outspoken, regardless of the issue, is the problem. However, lang and Etheridge both chose a contentious organization such as PETA over lesbian and gay groups.

the terms and who stands to benefit from the particular increase known as "lesbian chic."

In Chapter 1, I explain that Martina Navratilova is an ideal figure for my research project because she encapsulates these contradictions. As well, I describe the five main interpretative and analytical questions which constitute my interpretative framework: a discourse of "a homosexuality of no importance;" the role of "the closet;" the link between knowledge and sexuality; commodity lesbianism and the process of "ining" (it's "in" to be "out"); and the integration of lesbians into the mainstream. Navratilova cannot easily be considered in the same way as other "out" celebrity lesbians because there are different expectations around sexuality and gender for star athletes in comparison to other types of celebrities. Thus, in Chapter 2, I investigate the configuration of gender and sexuality around women in sport and, particularly, lesbians in sport. In Chapter 3, I cover various discussions of lesbians in the media and challenge the discourse of progressiveness around these representations by examining the homophobic backlash that coexists with "lesbian chic." Finally, I bring all these aspects together in Chapter 4 where I analyse various representational strategies that mainstream media apply to Navratilova: Martina as a star athlete; Martina as a consummate American; Martina as an activist; and Martina as a lesbian.

I am conscious that this text might give the impression that I have posed two separate and distinct sexual identities/communities: heterosexuals or straights and homosexuals or lesbians and gays. I have not done this to establish a rigid or fixed notion of sexual identity nor to propose a binary opposition between the two groupings. I am well aware that sexualities and identities are fluid and non-absolute. Rather, I am using these terms for the following reasons. First, I have a personal and political investment in

identifying myself within this thesis as a lesbian and as part of a diverse community of lesbians. Second, mainstream media vehemently maintains a separation between heterosexuals and homosexuals and one of the goals of this thesis is to point out what gets erased when we make believe the barriers or margins have been dissolved.

Towards this goal, I use the first person singular throughout this thesis in order to locate my position and to critique the deployment of a universalizing "we" in many of the mainstream media examples which I discuss. As well, I include anecdotal descriptions of my own response to some of the media events and representations which I explore. These anecdotes are not casual asides from my main argument but, instead, function as part of my critical analysis. This approach is an established tradition within feminist theoretical writing. In "Banality in Cultural Studies," Meaghan Morris explains how she uses this strategy in her own work:

I take anecdotes, or yarns, to be primarily referential. They are oriented futuristically towards the construction of a precise, local, and *social* discursive context, of which the anecdote then functions as a *mise en abyme*. That is to say, anecdotes for me are not expressions of personal experience, but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working. So anecdotes need not be true stories, but they must be functional in a given exchange (7).

A key reason that I include the personal, thereby moving between different levels of language, is in order to mark the diverse positions that I bring to this project. I am an academic, I am a lesbian, I am a consumer of popular culture and a fan of Navratilova — and all of these locations overlap to produce the analysis present in this thesis.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Project

1) Object/Subject of Study

In the introduction, I outline several reasons why I have chosen Martina Navratilova as the locus of my investigation. In this section, I elaborate on both Navratilova's appeal and on the relevance of the historical period of 1990-95. To begin with, Navratilova differs from other "out" celebrity lesbians in several significant ways. First, she is an athlete. As Diane Hamer writes in her article "Netting the press: playing with Martina" (1994), Navratilova's status as an athlete causes "slippages in popular discourses between tennis, masculinity and lesbianism" (63). For this reason, Navratilova embodies the inherent gaps and tensions in being a female athlete, a sport icon and an "out" lesbian. Second, she came "out" in the early 1980s in anticipation of being "outed" in the press. Navratilova was never given the chance to "come out" on her own terms in the era of "lesbian chic" and thus her 1980s "out" persona provides an interesting contrast to her 1990s "out" activist persona. Thirdly, she is politically active around issues of gender and sexuality and she continually asserts the importance of her lesbianism in self-representations. This type of activism is difficult to fit within a discourse of "a homosexuality of no importance" and yet mainstream media continues to represent Navratilova as *the* ultimate lesbian icon.

I have chosen to focus on mainstream magazine and newspaper articles about Navratilova from 1990-95 because this historical period coincides with 1) the sudden proliferation of representations of lesbians in North American mainstream media, and 2) Navratilova's retirement from tennis (which was covered extensively by North American mainstream media). My argument

draws on earlier representations of Navratilova, specifically her 1985 autobiography, because these texts demonstrate not only that lesbians were visible prior to the 1990s, but also that a shift in the way lesbians are being represented in mainstream media has indeed taken place. Having identified a larger social trend – the proliferation of representations of lesbians in North American mainstream media in the 1990s – as my site of inquiry, I also reference mainstream magazine and newspaper articles on lesbians in general from between 1990-95. Furthermore, because Navratilova is a female athlete, I address recent mainstream representations of women athletes from sports magazines and television commercials (aired during sporting events) as these are the formats in which these representations most frequently appear. And finally, I briefly contrast mainstream representations of Navratilova with those of lesbian media to show how, while the former frames Navratilova's lesbianism as "a homosexuality of no importance," the latter stresses how significant it is to lesbians.

2) Interpretive Framework

In her article "Textual Obsessions: methodology, history and researching female spectatorship," Jackie Stacey writes that "Questions of methodology are important not only in terms of sources and objects of study, but also in terms of the selection of particular interpretive frameworks. Indeed, there is often a close connection between the two" (262). In terms of my project, the terrain or site of my inquiry is the sudden boon of representations of lesbians and the discourse of "progressiveness" that has accompanied this increase. As this site has generated the interpretive and analytical questions that I bring to problematic, my theoretical analysis is conducted within the terrain of

lesbian/feminist and "queer" theories of gender and sexual identity, lesbian/feminist writings on visibility and representation, and recent Marxist and feminist writings on women in sport.

The key interpretive and analytical questions that inform my problematic are:

- 2.1) the shift from representing lesbians as "the invisible homosexuals" (Gever) to representing lesbianism as "a homosexuality of no importance" (Miller);
- 2.2) the role of the closet, i.e., how "the closet" functions to position lesbians both *inside* and *outside* the dominant conceptual scheme (Sedgwick);
- 2.3) the relationship between discourses on knowledge and sexuality and the possible implications of a "public" that believes itself to be "in the know" when it comes to lesbians (Sedgwick); and
- 2.4) the concepts of commodity lesbianism and of "ining" (Clark);
- 2.5) the possibility that representing lesbians within mainstream media could be a way of re-integrating the threat of dangerous dykes previously banished to the periphery (de Lauretis; Wittig; Frye).

2.1) a homosexuality of no importance

In his article "Anal Rope," D. A. Miller discusses the detailed attention film critics pay to Alfred Hitchcock's "single shot" technique in *Rope* (1948) and explains that this focus on the supposed lack of montage in the film has, strangely enough, "hardly managed to generate a single accurate account of the technique in question" (119). He further outlines Hitchcock's own diligent attention to technique in interviews about the film and suggests that both the critics' and Hitchcock's own concentration on this perspective "signals a strategy for dismissing the consequences of everything else" (121), including

the film's implicit homosexual content. Miller reproduces a section from François Truffaut's interview with Hitchcock as an example of how this strategy of dismissal is deployed:

'Since Alfred Hitchcock deals solely with the technical aspects of *Rope*,' [Truffaut] writes in the interview, 'a brief description of the story is sufficient for our purposes. . . . 'All the action takes place on a summer evening in a New York apartment. Two young homosexuals strangle a school friend just for the thrill of it and conceal his body in a chest in the very room in which his parents and fiancée are expected for a cocktail party. Among the guests is their former school teacher. As the party is in progress, their attempt to impress their mentor leads them to disclose bits of truth, which he eventually pieces together. Before the evening is over, he will discover the body and turn the two young men over to the police' (121).

Miller points out that "For all the announced succinctness, one word here appears almost sumptuously extraneous: homosexual" (121). Unlike the other elements of Truffaut's description, which are all derived from what is seen and what is heard in the film, the homosexuality of the film's protagonists is neither demonstrated nor discussed. Thus, in Truffaut's account, the homosexuality of the main characters is rendered "at once a remarkable and a remarkably pointless piece of information" (121).

Miller suggests that Truffaut, as well as other critics, acknowledge the homosexuality in *Rope* in such a way that it becomes irrelevant and, therefore, can be dismissed. He writes, "Unlike Hitchcock in the interview, [Truffaut] does not thus repress the homosexual theme, if that means utterly refusing to address it, so much as he constructs it into a *homosexuality of no importance*" (122). It is this strategy of dismissal – a dismissal that renders the object (or subject) at hand at once remarkable and remarkably pointless – that I find has potential for the analysis of my object/subject of study. As stated in my introduction, I argue that the shift in representing lesbians in mainstream media

is indicative of a new cultural strategy for dealing with lesbian sexual difference – a strategy of partaking of, and enjoying, lesbian difference while at the same time denying its importance and relevance. This approach is strikingly similar to the strategy of dismissal that Miller believes occurs in critical analysis of *Rope*. To put it simply, just as Truffaut acknowledges the homosexuality in *Rope* to "prevent it from entering into an eventual understanding of the film" (122), mainstream media acknowledges lesbianism to prevent it from entering into an eventual understanding of how discourses on sexual difference and deviance help construct and maintain heterosexuality as the "norm."

Miller argues that the homosexuality in *Rope* is not only rendered inconsequential to analysis, but is also made out to be banal:

Concerning the narrative homosexuality [in *Rope*] . . . it affects a bored indifference that seldom goes beyond a brief banalizing acknowledgment à la Truffaut, as though to suggest that the idea of men kissing, sucking, fucking one another, were altogether devoid of the fascination that, on the contrary, the problems of the mobile camera may be taken for granted to hold in abundance (122).

Such bored indifference suggests that homosexuality is less interesting than can plausibly be the case: the idea of homosexuality is anything but devoid of fascination.

For the purposes of my project, I would like to combine Miller's discussion of "a homosexuality of no importance" with Martha Gever's discussion of the conditions of visibility. As I have already mentioned, the construction of lesbianism as a homosexuality of no importance is one of the conditions of lesbian visibility in the 1990s. In addition, Gever's attention to visibility as a shared political goal for lesbians is of interest when considering the possible connection between the sudden abundance of representations of

lesbians in mainstream media and recent lesbian activism around visibility.

Gever explains that

despite the fragmentation of lesbian identity implied by the recognition of cultural difference, increased visibility seems to provide a singular political goal Perhaps this is why visibility has replaced solidarity as the political umbrella under which lesbians are organizing in the nineties and why lesbians' efforts to attain full civil rights, as well as to establish validity of lesbian sexuality and identity, are now routinely articulated as functions of enhanced visibility (210).

Indeed, during the late 1980s, in an effort to dispel what Gever refers to as "the mythical invisibility of lesbians" (210), lesbian activists felt it necessary to assert, through sticker campaigns, etc., that 'lesbians are everywhere.' In the 1990s, such a visibility campaign would appear no longer necessary — *lesbians* (or at least representations of lesbians) *are everywhere*. Lesbians are remarkably visible in the sense that we are presented and represented again and again in mainstream media. However, being lesbian is also presented as a remarkably pointless piece of information. Thus, as Gever points out, "this concept of visibility, in its deployment as a political tool, needs to be interrogated carefully" (210). After all, what does it mean when one's visibility is "framed" as being *of no importance*? As Miller explains that the "heavy silence surrounding homosexuality" (122) in *Rope* requires an explanation because of its seeming irrelevance, I believe that the fervor of comment around "lesbian chic" requires explanation *because of* the discourse of irrelevance that surrounds it.

2.2) the role of "the closet"

In "Epistemology of the Closet," Eve Sedgwick discusses the function of "the closet" (post-Stonewall) in defining lesbian and gay identity. Sedgwick points to the difference between our sexual identity and our management of information about our sexual identity, describing how gays and lesbians must constantly decide whether to "come out" or remain "closeted." More significant to a discussion of "lesbian chic," she raises the question of how "the closet" functions in defining heterosexual identity. By addressing the "public attention and freshness of drama" that surrounds every "outing" (45), Sedgwick shifts the focus from those who are in a position of having to reveal or withhold information, to the those who anxiously await our revelations. She describes this shift as one between "those who inhabit the closet . . . [to those] in the ambient heterosexual culture who enjoin it and whose intimate representational needs it serves in a way less extortionate to themselves" (46).

Similarly, when looking at the proliferation of representations of lesbians in the early 1990s, one needs to re-direct attention from those who are being represented (lesbians) to those "in the ambient heterosexual culture . . . whose intimate representational needs" are being met. In the introduction I explain that there is a general discourse of progressiveness around these representations, based on the assumption that they benefit or advance lesbians through increased visibility. The purpose of my case study is to explore how lesbianism is being represented as a homosexuality of no importance and to ask for whom this particular strategy of representation works. In short, for whom are these representations produced and why?

Monique Wittig's arguments in "The Straight Mind" supports Sedgwick's analysis. According to Wittig, "homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality"

(28). She writes, "straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level. It cannot work economically, symbolically, linguistically, or politically without this concept" (28-29). In this sense, homosexuality is constructed in ways which help define the boundaries of "proper" heterosexual identity. In Wittig's words "The straight mind cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness, as well" (28).¹ Following in this vein of reasoning, I argue that images of homosexuals produced for heterosexuals are very much about images of heterosexuality. In other words, "lesbian chic" cannot only be explained in terms of lesbian visibility: one must also examine how heterosexuality is implicated in images of homosexuality in mainstream media.²

2.3) knowledge and sexuality

Another point from Sedgwick that supports my analysis is her linking of discourses on knowledge with discourses on sexuality. In "Epistemology of the Closet," Sedgwick argues that, since the end of the nineteenth century, much of the attention surrounding, and effort to represent (or not represent),

¹ For the purposes of my argument, I am focusing on the relationship of homosexuality to heterosexuality, however, it is important to note that discourses on sexuality cannot be isolated from the myriad of other discourses that help shape who we are: our race, gender, class, etc.. As Biddy Martin writes in "Sexual Practice and changing Lesbian identities," "lesbianism and male homosexuality are not only implicated in the hegemonic terms of heterosexuality, and caught in the irreducibly complex web of sexual definition, they are implicated in a range of intersecting discursive fields" (106).

² I address how it is heterosexuals, not homosexuals, who are the subjects of these representations in Chapter 4.

homosexuality has "been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure" (47). What resides in "the closet" is "the sex that dare not speak its name" — the sex that is secret — and what makes a secret alluring is that it must be known by some privileged individuals and kept from others. The privileged must participate in keeping the secret and in regulating information about it. Thus, a secret is produced through the careful juxtaposition of those who know and those who do not know. Sedgwick further claims that, in our culture, the knowledgeable are those who are sexually knowledgeable. She explains, knowledge and sex are "conceptually inseparable from one another — so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance sexual ignorance" (49). The sudden abundance of representations of lesbians in mainstream media in recent years appears to demonstrate that "the public," or at the very least the media, considers itself to be "in the know" when it comes to lesbians. By focusing on who is positioned as knowledgeable and who is positioned as known, I want to investigate more closely what it means to be "in the know" when it comes to recent representations of lesbians in mainstream media.

2.4) it's "in" to be "out"

In her article "Commodity Lesbianism," Danae Clark discusses the historical reasons why, until recently, lesbians have not been targeted as consumers: first, the belief that "lesbians as a social group have not been economically powerful"; second, the belief that "lesbians have not been easily identifiable as a social group"; and third, the fact that "advertisers have had no desire to identify a viable lesbian consumer group" (187). Clark points out that lesbian and feminist activism has resulted in increasingly open attitudes

towards sexuality and improved economic status for lesbians. As well, she supports Arlene Stein's observation that "the old-style, politically [correct]" brand of lesbianism has been eclipsed by "lifestyle lesbianism" – which is defined by Stein as "the recognition of the 'diverse subcultural pockets and cliques'" (189) that make up lesbian communities. Clark adds that "lifestyle lesbianism" may be much more than the recognition of diversity and posits the possibility that "values and lifestyles" research by the U.S. advertising industry may have helped *create* the phenomenon.

Regardless of the reasons, whether it be a change in cultural attitudes brought about by feminism and/or the recognition that lesbians do indeed have money to spend, Clark believes that advertisers are now interested in identifying, possibly even in creating, "a viable lesbian consumer group." However, at the same time they continue to be fearful that "openly appealing to a homosexual market" (187) will taint their products and alienate potential heterosexual consumers. As a result, advertisers strategically employ "a dual marketing approach" known as "gay window advertising" (187-8).³ According to Clark, "gay window advertising" is the phrase used to describe advertising images that make use of certain visual clues or codes (such as showing one or more women together without a man). The clues may be read as lesbian-friendly by lesbians viewers while they go unnoticed or are ignored by heterosexuals. In other words, these coded images create "points of identification" for lesbian consumers (190) while heterosexual consumers remain blissfully ignorant of their lesbian appeal.

³ Clark uses the phrase "gay window advertising" to discuss this marketing strategy even though it is aimed at lesbians because, as she explains, this is "the discursive phrase currently employed by the advertising industry" (190).

While Clark's attention to the conditions of lesbian visibility in advertising is strong, her concept of "gay window advertising" as secret-coded-messages-for-lesbians-only underestimates heterosexual consumers as well as the advertising industry. Admittedly, Clark's article is about how "gay window advertising" becomes "involved in lesbian notions of identity, community, politics, and fashion" (190) and not about how, or even *if*, heterosexuals read these ads. However, her underlying assumption seems to be that "gay window advertising" is created to entice lesbians and not straights. When Clark discusses lesbians reading between the lines to make lesbian meaning possible she never questions how straight readers might be doing something quite similar. Such an omission seems strange when she acknowledges that "Lesbian readers . . . know that they are not the primary audience for mainstream advertising, that androgyny is a fashionable and profitable commodity, and that the fashion models in these ads are quite probably heterosexual" (192). This statement points directly to who the intended "audience" is — a presumably straight one — and begs the question why is androgyny fashionable to heterosexuals?

Clark does, very briefly, touch on the implications of heterosexual women buying androgynous (possibly lesbian) images when she writes that "gay window advertising" might offer straights an "alternative." To explain what she means by this statement, she offers her readers two quotes. The first is from Judith Williamson: "(t)he bourgeois always wants to be in disguise, and the customs and habits of the oppressed seem so much more fascinating than [her] own" (197).⁴ The second is from Michael Bronski: "when gay sensibility is used as a sales pitch, the strategy is that gay images imply distinction and non-

⁴ Clark obviously intends her reader to substitute one supposedly unified dominant group, heterosexuals, for another, the bourgeois, when reading this quote.

conformity, granting straight consumers a longed-for place outside the humdrum mainstream" (197).

The idea that straights enjoy "gay sensibility" because it offers them an opportunity to escape the humdrum mainstream relies on the strict regulation of the boundaries between the deviant⁵ and the dominant. In other words, the dominant must be certain who the deviant is, and what customs and habits are outside the norm before they can transgress the boundaries. One of the ways to uphold strict boundaries is through the use of stereotypes. In "The role of stereotypes," Richard Dyer writes that "the most important function of the stereotype [is] to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who is clearly beyond it" (16). Dyer goes on to explain that "The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares" (16).⁶

"Lesbian chic" – or the popularity of representations of lesbians in mainstream media – on the other hand, is not about maintaining the boundaries between the norm and the deviant in this strictest sense. Circulating within a discourse of a homosexuality of no importance, this representational strategy tells us that boundaries no longer exist and that we can no longer easily distinguish between who is on the inside and who is on the outside. It is truly a strategy of dismissal because the boundaries still exist, but we pretend they do not. It is very similar to Stuart Hall's description of the

⁵ I am using the term deviant in a similar sense to Blinde and Taub, i.e., deviants are individuals who engage in "nontraditional" gender and sexual behaviors and, as a result, "are subjected to various forms of social stigmatization" (521).

⁶ I expand on the implications of heterosexuals buying (into) homosexuality in Chapter 4.

endless pleasure dominant culture enjoys when consuming the Other.⁷ In "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," he describes dominant culture as partaking of difference like dining out at an "ethnic" restaurant; adding flavour to one's identity with a taste of the foreign, the unusual, the divergent, the deviant. The dominant dines out without fear, threat or danger because "there is no difference which it cannot contain, no otherness it cannot speak, no marginality which it cannot take pleasure out of" (33).

Clark's discussion of "gay window advertising" is quite different from my own discussion of recent representations of lesbians in mainstream media. However, her description of "gay window advertising" as a practice of "ining" has particularly strong implications for a discourse of a homosexuality of no importance because the process of "ining" may negate the identity politics of being "out." According to Clark, "ining" may erase certain notions of community and replace one kind of politics, gay activism, with another kind of politics, a liberal discourse of choice. She writes,

In an era of "outing" . . . gay window advertising can be described as a practice of "ining." In other words, this type of advertising invites us to look *into* the ad to identify with elements of style, invites us *in* as consumers, invites us to be part of a fashionable "*in* crowd," but negates an identity politics based on the act of "coming out." Indeed, within the world of gay window advertising, there is no lesbian community to come out to, no lesbian community to identify with, no indication that lesbianism or "lesbian style" is a political issue. This stylization furthermore promotes a liberal discourse of choice that separates sexuality from politics and connects them both with consumerism (196).

Clark claims that "gay window advertising" invites lesbians *into* a particular lifestyle as consumers. I would like to elaborate on this point in two

⁷ By Other I am referring to identities that have been excluded from the norm on the basis of gender, race, ethnic, sexual difference, etc.. I realize that by using this term, and the term "norm," I run the risk of conflating diverse identities/communities and of setting up a binary opposition. This is certainly not my intent.

ways. First, I would like to move from discussing "gay window advertising" as an invitation into a particular lifestyle to discussing "lesbian chic" as an invitation into the dominant conceptual scheme.⁸ Second, I believe that the popularity of representations of lesbians in mainstream media suggests that a broader *invitation* is going out. For the purposes of my argument, "ining" is the process of inviting viewers/readers to occupy territory that used to be "marginal" or outside the dominant but is now, supposedly, part of "our collective consciousness."

The underlying assumption of Clark's article is that "queer" positive representations are about homosexuals and not about heterosexuals. However, several lesbian, gay and "queer" theorists have pointed out that discourses on homosexuality do not exist in a vacuum and that homosexuality plays an important role in defining heterosexuality. Thus my study of representations of lesbians in mainstream media is as much, if not more, about prevailing positions for heterosexuals as it is about lesbian sexuality.

2.5) integrating lesbians into the mainstream

In *Lesbian Utopics*, Annamarie Jagose writes that "the most common explanation for the lesbian's continued invisibility has been that, insofar as she disrupts culturally dominant understanding of gender and sexuality, the lesbian is not able to be thought" (1). While lesbian activism has focused on making lesbians more visible, Jagose argues that lesbian/feminist theorists have attempted to account for our mythic invisibility by constructing a location for lesbians outside and beyond masculinist, phallocentric culture/society.

⁸ I expand this point later in section 2.5, "integrating lesbians into the mainstream."

According to Jagose, our theorized exteriority is further fabricated as a privileged, utopic site for lesbian subjects. She thus labels a decade's worth of lesbian/feminist writings on identity and location as "feminist utopics" and makes the claim that, while "politically strategic" (16), such theories and writings suffer a "foundational flaw" which is "that the exteriority of the utopic category is phantasmic and conceals that category's proper position within the networks of power" (5).

I am interested in exploring both the "framing" of lesbians as once "invisible" (or outside the dominant conceptual scheme) and as a part of "our collective consciousness" (or inside the dominant conceptual scheme). Towards this end, I would like to address Jagose's belief that earlier lesbian/feminist theorists, such as Wittig, Luce Irigaray and Nicole Brossard, were off the mark when it came to questions of lesbian identity and location in relation to dominant heterosexual culture. Jagose clearly argues that these writers placed lesbians outside of heterosexual culture and that they argued for exteriority as a "utopic" site. I propose that, rather than positioning lesbians as exterior, earlier lesbian/feminist theorists were responding to 1) the identification of lesbians as deviants who are not properly feminine and 2) the resulting positioning of lesbians outside the confines of gender. In short, they did not place lesbians on the outside, rather they responded to the already existing perception that lesbians are exterior – and therefore "invisible."

My analyse retains Jagose's identification of a shared or common project in earlier lesbian/feminist writings: the focus on the possible advantages of lesbian exteriority. At the same time, I challenge her claim that this body of theory, which she labels as "lesbian utopics," does not address relations of power. In fact, many of these theorists attempt to re-construct lesbian exteriority as a possible location of empowerment. For example, in "Eccentric

Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," Teresa de Lauretis argues that "If there is a privileged point of identification, lesbianism, which gives impetus to the work of self-(de)construction, that is not, however, a truer or essential or unifying identity, but precisely the critical vantage point, the crucial stake . . . " (136). De Lauretis thus suggests that since lesbians are positioned outside, are constructed as "invisible" in the eyes of the dominant, lesbian identity might actually be a critical vantage point.

De Lauretis, drawing on the work of Marilyn Frye, goes on to explain that

being outside a conceptual system puts one "in a position to see things that cannot be seen within"; to assume that position, to displace oneself from the system, to dislocate, dis-affiliate, or disengage one's attention from it, is to experience "a reorientation of attention . . . a feeling of disengagement and re-engagement of one's power as perceiver" (de Lauretis: 144).

This observation clearly indicates that de Lauretis and Frye are aware that lesbians exist *both inside and outside* dominant heterosexual culture. The point de Lauretis is trying to make is that we are able to choose – through displacement, dislocation, dis-affiliation, disengagement with the dominant – to re-orient and re-engage our powers of perception. Kobena Mercer makes a very similar argument in "Skin Head Sex Thing" where he writes

I would argue that black gay and lesbian artists are producing exciting and important work not because they happen to be black lesbians and gay men but because they have made cultural and political choices out of their experiences of marginality that situate them at the interface between different traditions (204).

In other words, being lesbian does not make you better able to see things, but it puts you in the position of being able to choose to see.

I cannot help but to wonder, in light of the recent proliferation of representations of lesbians in mainstream media, if placing lesbians on the outside – if ignoring us or claiming that we are invisible – actually helps

construct a "critical vantage point" for lesbians. By re-presenting lesbians within the dominant conceptual system, mainstream media re-integrates dangerous dykes formerly banished to the periphery and defuses the threat of this external vantage point.

3) The Paradox of Lesbians

In the earlier discussion on "ining," I put forward the idea that the sudden boon of representations of lesbians in mainstream media in the 1990s is a way of inviting viewers/readers to occupy territory that used to be "marginal" or outside the dominant but is now, supposedly, part of "our collective consciousness." I would like to take this idea further and add that, at the same time the invitation to occupy formerly "marginal" territory is going out, lesbians are being invited in to participate in the dominant conceptual scheme. This is not to say that lesbians were not figured in the dominant conceptual scheme previous to the 1990s, only that lesbians are no longer "framed" as the invisible homosexuals.

Drawing together the points from my five interpretive and analytical questions generates two key questions for the subsequent chapters. First, what does it mean to be suddenly visible, to be recognized as part of the inside instead of being constructed as part of the outside? Following through on Sedgwick's point that the knowledgeable are those who are sexually knowledgeable, I stress that the very process of representing lesbians in mainstream media is tied to the belief "the public" is "in the know" when it comes to lesbians. This leads me to my second question: is it possible that inviting lesbian into the dominant conceptual scheme is a way of "knowing" and

ultimately containing the threat that any group with a "critical vantage point" poses?

It would seem as though what Teresa de Lauretis once described as the paradox of women – "at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable" (115) – is now most particularly the paradox of lesbians. One route to understanding this paradox comes from Martha Gever's point that "visibility is not a property essential to images, but is constituted culturally. Thus, there is no ideology-free window through which lesbians can be seen" (210). In other words, I want to emphasize that the increased visibility of lesbians is just as much an ideological construct as our invisibility ever was and to use this insight to investigate the new proliferation of representations of lesbians in mainstream media.

Chapter 2: Women in Sport

In Western culture, sport is a male domain. Just turn on your television any Sunday afternoon and try to find coverage of women's sports. Unless the afternoon you choose happens to coincide with Wimbledon or the Olympics (or possibly the Olympic trials), the most you can hope for is that the scores for women's matches or games will appear at the bottom of the screen during coverage of the "real" matches or games between men. Or, you may be treated to a profile of the "hottest," fastest growing sport for women in the U.S. - beach volley-ball -- where player's uniforms are skin tight, two-piece lycra which feature corporate sponsors' ads across the derriere.¹

In "Women in Sport in Ideology," Paul Willis explains one of the possible reasons why sport, in particular, remains a bastion of male dominance. Willis writes, "Sport and biological beliefs about gender difference combine into one of the few privileged areas where we seem to be dealing with unmediated 'reality,' where we know 'what's what' without having to listen to the involved self-serving analyses of theorists, analysts, political groups, etc." (31). Quagmired in biological discourses on gender difference, sport appears autonomous from "'biased' interpretation" (32). Feminism has not changed the "fact" that men are "naturally" stronger than women, faster than women, and that these are differences we can see with our own eyes. And just in case our eyes fail us, we can always use a stop watch because these differences are easily *measured*. It is this ability to see and measure athletic performances

¹ Team volley-ball has been around for ages at college/university and Olympic levels, but has never received the attention and corporate support of beach volley-ball. For example, there has long been professional team volley-ball leagues in other countries while it has remained an amateur sport in Canada and the U.S.. Beach volley-ball, on the other hand, has been a professional sports for several years and makes its Olympic debut at the 1996 Games in Atlanta.

that makes sport ideal for differentiating between the "sexes," i.e., if we can see the difference, measure the difference, then the difference is believed to be "real" and "natural."

Willis argues that it is sports' separation "from other areas of society, its differences, its autonomy, wherein lies its power for legitimation -- it would not be believed if it did not show this independence and apparent capacity to carry social meaning separately from what the powerful say" (32). Take, for example, the belief that Jesse Owens triumphed over Fascist dogma through his amazing "natural" abilities at the 1936 Olympics. Even Billie Jean King's "unnatural" victory over Bobby Riggs in 1973's "battle of the sexes" seems to suggest that excellence in sports can be achieved in spite of the powers that be. However, as Willis points out,

linear determinism will not do if we are interested in the social meaning of a phenomenon. I mean, for instance, that to know, more exactly why it is that women can muster only 90 per cent of a man's [physical] strength cannot help us to comprehend, explain, or change the massive feeling in our society that a woman has no business flexing her muscles anyway (33).

Or to be more direct: *why* does it matter that women are physically different from men and *to whom* does it matter?

To some, the "knowledge" of physical difference between the sexes is intrinsically linked to the belief that, in some very significant ways, women are inferior to men. It matters "that women can muster only 90 per cent of a man's strength" because this "knowledge" is used to buttress prevailing social attitudes (33-34). To know exactly how and why women are different is to know your place as a man (the standard against which women are measured) and, equally important, to know the place of women (sub-standard by comparison). Therefore, to know why, or even if, women have less physical strength than men may not help us to understand sexism in sport, but looking at who

cultivates this "knowledge" and how, in turn, this "knowledge" is deployed, may help illuminate the link between what differences this society choose to see and *measure* and the understanding of what these differences mean. In short, which differences are measured and to whom these differences matter becomes much more important information than the differences in and of themselves.

In "Women Athletes as Falsely Accused Deviants: Managing the Lesbian Stigma," Elaine Blinde and Diane Taub write that gender is "a powerful normative system" that "entails socially constructed conceptualizations of behavior intricately tied to societal perceptions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (521). These norms define appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for men and woman: for example, "real" men are masculine (aggressive, assertive, physical and active) and "real" women are feminine (nurturing, supportive, delicate and passive). As feminists have been pointing out for decades, it is not too hard to see who has the upper-hand in this model. Female athletes challenge this normative system by being physically active and competitive with each other — behavior that is clearly "unladylike" and thus in violation of gender norms. Women who are involved in team sports constitute an even more significant threat by developing camaraderie and solidarity with female teammates. Perhaps this is why the few women athletes who do receive coverage by mainstream media usually participate in individual sports like tennis, track and field and swimming.²

² Willis supports that the prevailing "image" of female athletes is as individuals. He writes, "One thinks of female athletes as alone — there is no popular image of back-slapping in the pub afterwards" (36). As well, Blinde and Taub point out that women who participate in team sports are more likely to be accused of being lesbians by men (529). In her interview with Heather Findlay, Navratilova supports Blinde and Taub's observation, remarking that "It's much more difficult for a team sport player [to be "out"] because they get blackballed out of the league" (Findlay, 18).

In her article "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sport," Susan Cahn furthers Blinde and Taub's argument that women athletes threaten gender norms and states that, because women athletes disrupt "a critical domain of male power and privilege," sport becomes "a strategic site for shoring up existing gender and sexual hierarchies" (364). Similarly, Willis points out that the continuous differentiation of men from women seems to be a "fundamental anxiety" in our culture and that "male preserves" such as sport need to be "continuously guaranteed" (35). One key way of guaranteeing that sport remain a male preserve is the continued stigmatization of female athletes, primarily through the use of the lesbian label. According to Cahn, the negative stereotype of the "mannish" or lesbian athlete is an effective means by which to confirm "both the masculinity of sport and its association with female deviance" (364).

Double Deviance: Lesbians in Sport

Blinde and Taub explain that the stigmatization of female athletes "represents a means of control as it preserves the traditional gender system. Fear of being labeled deviant keeps women 'in their place' and reduces challenges to prevailing gender norms" (522). The act of accusing a female athlete of lesbianism is one of the most effective ways to stigmatize her, whether she is straight or lesbian, because lesbianism already "represents a violation of sexuality norms" (522). In "Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism, and Lesbians in Sport," Pat Griffin explains that "The lesbian label is used to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior in a patriarchal culture: When a woman is called a lesbian, she knows she is out of bounds"

(253). Thus to call a female athlete a lesbian, or to identify a specific sport (such as tennis, softball or field hockey) as blighted with lesbians, is to taint the woman, or women, involved as deviant or outside gender and sexual norms. Griffin goes on to write that, true or not, the accusation of lesbianism "is intimidating enough to remind women in sport that [they] are being watched and that if [they] step out of line, [they] will be punished" (256). I would add that the accusation of lesbianism is a clear indication that a female athlete is already out of bounds and further serves to warn other women athletes of what their punishment will be if they should so choose to exceed the boundaries of "proper" feminine behavior.

While all female athletes are not necessarily labeled lesbian, the ones who are play an important role in keeping the rest in line. Cahn explains that "The figure of the mannish lesbian athlete has acted as a powerful but unarticulated 'bogey woman' of sport, forming a silent foil for more corrective images that attempt to rehabilitate the image of woman athletes and resolve the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity" (343). Out of fear of being labeled deviant/lesbian, both straight and lesbian athletes must manage the stigmatization of the lesbian label by policing themselves and their sport against gender violators. They respond to the threat of negative stereotyping by emphasizing their feminine gender and sexual appeal to men and downplaying their strength and prowess (Blinde & Taub, Cahn, Griffin, Willis). Female athletes go to great lengths to make distinctions between themselves and the image of the masculine (or butch) female athlete, "consciously cultivate[ing] high-profile heterosexual images" (Griffin, 258). Furthermore, this process of "femme-ifying" is encouraged by the male sponsors of women's sports who understand all too well "that sexual hype,

much more than caution, [helps] to attract customers and mute charges of [lesbianism]" (Cahn, 347).

The 1992 film *A League of Their Own* (Penny Marshall) is a fictionalized account of the women who played professional baseball in the American all-girl league during the second world war. The film depicts female players being sent to charm school to learn proper feminine behavior as well as being asked to don provocative shorts so that they will be more appealing to their male fans. Set in the early '40s, these blatant attempts to "doll up" the characters function as comic relief — indeed, viewers may laugh simply because such scenarios seem a distant part of our overtly sexist past. Few of us can imagine U.S. national basketball team player Rebecca Lobo or Canadian rower Silken Laumann suffering similar trials.

However, in recent years attempts to recuperate the "image" of female athletes has intensified, not slackened. According to Griffin,

Where presenting a feminine image previously sufficed, corporate sponsors, professional women's sport organizations, some women's college teams, and individual athletes have moved beyond presenting a feminine image to adopting a more explicit display of heterosex [sic] appeal. The Ladies Professional Golf Association's 1989 promotional material featured photographs of its pro golfers posing in pin-up style swimsuits. . . . The women's basketball promotional brochure from Northwestern State University of Louisiana included a photograph of the women's team dressed in Playboy bunny outfits. The copy crowed 'These girls can play, boy!' and invited basketball fans to watch games in the 'Pleasure Palace' (255).

And little has changed since Griffin wrote these words in 1992. A recent television advertising campaign for Sears (aired on NBC, Spring 1996) features members of the U.S. women's national basketball team on the court, on the road and at home. Star centre Lisa Leslie is heard saying "Ya know, everyone is allowed to be who they are. Me, for example, I'm very feminine." To prove

just how feminine she is, Leslie is shown in the locker room in a form-fitting, short black dress, painting her toe nails pink and strapping on spiked heels. Other team members are shown lying in bed, holding a baby or singing a gospel hymn on the team bus.

What is significant about the Sears ad is that all of the women depicted fit conventional notions of beauty and womanhood: none of the stockier, more muscular, "masculine" or dykey-looking members of the team are featured. The women on the national team are the amongst very best athletes from U.S. women's college basketball; however, in this ad they are marketed as sexually attractive *to men*, as nurturing mothers and as God-fearing Christian women. It is fairly clear that while Sears supports the U.S. women's national basketball team, it does not want potential customers to associate their corporate name with sweaty, muscular or dykey women.

What may not be quite as clear is that, in an effort to lure corporate sponsors, the U.S. women's national basketball team actively constructs itself as healthy, wholesome and lesbian-free. Management, coaches and players know all too well that the team could not exist without the support of corporations such as Sears and so they mindfully work at putting the team's "prettiest" face (usually Leslie's) forward at all times. In an article on the women's national team and the rising popularity of women's basketball in the States, Alexander Wolff notes,

The national team's \$3 million budget wouldn't be possible without the support of corporate decision makers The NBA, that pin-striped marketing leviathan, is acting as agent for sponsorship deals involving the women's team. A total 10 games leading up to the Olympics will be televised by ABC, ESPN and ESPN2. "It's like a domino effect," says Carla McGhee, who helped lead Tennessee to the '91 NCAA championship. "We got

the NBA's attention. Then came Nike and Reebok. Maybe Victoria's Secret will start giving us stuff' (May 29, 1995, 69).³

When ABC Sports aired an exhibition game between the U.S. women's national team and an all-star college women's team, commentators explained how this particular national team has been successfully marketed through advertising appearances for various sponsors (Nike and Sears, in particular), "modeling sessions" for the players and, most notably, an appearance by Leslie in Vogue magazine.

Some players are better suited for the pages of Victoria Secret's catalogue and Vogue magazine than others. Without doubt, this is why the more feminine, straighter looking athletes – the mothers and would-be-models – are the women that represent the team and who reap the endorsement dollars. Women like Leslie act as insurance against the other, less savory, "masculine" or mannish lesbian "types" on the team. Players that fit this latter, tarnished image are kept out of the lime light by team management and avoided by corporate sponsors like the plague. In fact, lesbian-looking players might not even have the opportunity to make it to the Olympic team level, having been weeded out of the game much earlier in their careers for being insufficiently feminine in appearance. Griffin describes how women thought to be lesbians are systematically purged from women's sports at the college level:

In a style reminiscent of 1950s McCarthyism, some coaches proclaim their anti-lesbian policies as an introduction to their

³ It is interesting to note that the NBA is actively involved in finding corporate backers for the U.S. women's national team at precisely the same time it is considering the feasibility of a women's professional basketball league in the U.S.. (Currently, American female basketball players who want to continue to play after college must join overseas professional teams in countries like France, Italy, Japan and Spain.) Getting a women's pro-league off the ground in the U.S. means suddenly convincing American sport consumers that women's games are just as exciting and as wholesome-all-American as men's – which is no small feat considering that for decades fans have been told precisely the opposite.

programs. Athletes thought to be lesbian are dropped from teams, find themselves benched, or are suddenly ostracized by coaches and teammates. Coaches impose informal quotas on the number of lesbians, or at least the number of athletes they think look like lesbians, on their teams (255).

The U.S. women's national softball team serves as an excellent example of how thoroughly "cleansed" of lesbians, or lesbian-looking women, some sports are at college/university and national team levels. On July 3, 1996 the *Oprah* show featured American Olympians (past and present), including the 1996 U.S. women's national softball team. All of the team players shown were white and most had long blonde tresses. These women typify the All-American, girl-next-door, white, anglo-saxon, protestant (WASP) archetype: they are tall, healthy, wholesome and feminine in appearance, with freckles on their cheeks and their long hair pulled into ponytails. And yet, in spite of the fact that they all fit conventional notions of beauty, the U.S. women's softball team were the only athletes treated to a make-over courtesy of Oprah Winfrey.

The brief makeover segment included scenes of various players saying how thrilled they were at the prospect of being made-over, including one player exclaiming "Help me. Make me look sexy." When Winfrey asked the male hair-stylist who re-vamped the team how he went about coming up with the various hair styles he answered "They [the female athletes] need to be shown that sport and femininity can be mixed." He further explained that "After the shower they can look good and be the mother, the wife, the girlfriend." Although the U.S. women's national softball team are currently the World Champions in their sport, there was no emphasis made on the players' athletic abilities or their competitive spirit. Instead, they were depicted as a bunch of girls who just want to look good for their debut at the upcoming Olympic games and in preparation for their big moment in the media spotlight.

When one considers that softball is an integral part of lesbian culture in North America, it is difficult to believe that all the best softball players in the U.S. are straight, never mind white with long blonde hair. In addition, one cannot help but to wonder why already feminine-looking women are being made-over on *Oprah*. I conclude that it is precisely because softball is identified as a lesbian-ridden sport that the U.S. national team is comprised of "femmy-looking" women. Furthermore, it seems that the stigma of lesbianism is so great in softball even conventionally feminine women must be subjected to further femme-ification on national television. The entire *Oprah* make-over segment is reminiscent of the tactics deployed in a *League of Their Own*; i.e., female athlete's are believed to lure fans not because of their athletic prowess but because they can be sexually attractive to men⁴ and/or upstanding examples of "proper" femininity ("the mother, the wife, the girlfriend"). The only type of humor this situation generates, when not part of a fictionalized account of women's sports in the early '40s, is bitter irony.

Thus, contrary to what Leslie says in the Sears ad, everyone – particularly lesbians – are *not* allowed to be who they are. There are clear benefits for female athletes who adhere to a more feminine, heterosexual image (such as being allowed to play at all) and equally clear punitive measures for those who fall outside the boundaries of "proper" gender and sexual norms. As a result, athletes like Leslie and the women on the U.S. national softball team are careful to mark and market themselves as "feminine" female athletes.

⁴ "Femme-ification" is designed to make female athletes sexually attractive to men at the expense of changing the precise features that makes these same athletes sexually attractive to lesbians.

Up to this point it may seem as though the treatment of female amateur and professional athletes in North America has changed very little over the past several decades. In many ways, as the marketing of the U.S. women's basketball team suggests, this is true. However, at same time, an interesting exception to the well-worn discourse of women athletes as either healthy looking ultra-femmes or dangerous dykes is emerging and can be seen in a recent Nike television ad (aired on NBC, Spring 1996). Like the Sears' ad, the Nike ad also features players from the U.S. women's national basketball team, including Lisa Leslie. However, alongside Leslie are two of the less "feminine," more aggressive team members. This commercial, which is usually run during women's sporting events, features the female trio dressed in Nike gear going head-to-head with male street players. Much to the chagrin of the guys, the women walk out onto the asphalt court, take their knocks and kick some butt. Spike Lee narrates: "This isn't a fairy tale. They didn't beat every guy. But they beat enough to say, 'athletes are athletes, basketball is basketball.'"

Unlike the Sears' ad, Nike can feature the more "butchy" female players because blatant re-enforcement of existing gender and sexual boundaries runs counter to Nike's discourse on difference. In Nike's ads, gender and sexual differences still exist (remember "They didn't beat every guy"), but the women athletes in these ads know that they can triumph in spite of the fact that they are women (and maybe even lesbians) because they "Just Do It" – "Just Do It" being Nike's slogan for the 1990s. In other words, yes woman athletes are different, but if they work harder, run faster, jump higher, etc., their difference

will not matter.⁵ Difference in this sense is reduced to the will of the individual to over-come adversity: in Nike's world every individual is capable of digging deep and mustering the dogged determination to over-come their difference. Of course, female, particularly lesbian, athletes who have suffered the slings and arrows of sexism and homophobia in sport know that their difference does matter and that often they are simply not permitted to "Just Do It" no matter how hard they work, how fast they run, how high they jump, etc..

There is a connection between Nike's usage of, and approach to, difference in their ad featuring members of the U.S. women's national basketball team and a discourse of homosexuality of no importance. Nike does include the less conventionally feminine, more "butchy" players but, within Nike's discursive framework, their unconventionality, their "butchiness," becomes a non-issue. It is not that Nike actively represses or denies the players difference — indeed, there it is as plain as day! — however, it is constructed as being irrelevant. After all, according to Nike "athletes are athletes" and "basketball is basketball" regardless of whether the players are women or men, straight or gay. As with the discourse of a homosexuality of no importance, Nike's strategy in including difference is a strategy of dismal: the female players' "butchiness" is both a remarkable and remarkably pointless bit of information.

A comparison of Nike's strategy and the "femme-ifying" strategies of *Oprah* and Sears makes one wonder why is it fashionable and profitable for

⁵ This discourse of hard-work-conquers-all is not only applied to gender and sexual difference in Nike ads, but may be used to dismiss or downplay almost any difference. For example, in 1995 Nike ran a TV ad which shows an Hispanic man in Nike clothing and sneakers running through a park. Text flashes across the screen: "Rick Munoz," "80 miles every week," "10 marathons every year," "HIV positive," and finally, "Just Do It." Like the ad featuring the U.S. women's team players, this ad supposes that every person has the same opportunity to "Do It," to overcome any obstacle, as long as they wear Nike gear.

Nike to use the approach that difference does not matter. The answer to this question lies in looking at who buys, both literally and figuratively, the vision of difference that Nike is selling.

Chapter 3: Lesbians in the media

In the September 8, 1995 issue of Entertainment Weekly – a "special report" on "The Gay 90s" – Jess Cagle writes:

It's never easy to trace the roots of a revolution, especially something as quicksilver and ephemeral as pop culture. But however it began, look at where it's led: ... moviemakers, TV producers, media people, and rock stars have turned entertainment on its head by freely mining gay culture for its sarcasm and style, its glitter and grit, its secrets and celebrations. In 1995, the gay stream flows freely into the mainstream (22).

Cagle goes on to ask, "What force roiled this sea change? A mission by Hollywood to (a) irradiate all forms of bigotry and homophobia, or (b) to destroy the values upon which society rests? Not on your lifestyle. Quite simply, gay sells" (22).

But why, and to whom, does "gay" sell? Cagle credits origins of "the gaying of America" to the realization "that homosexuals [comprise] a very desirable demographic. Not the largest demographic, but one with handfuls of disposable income" (24). This statement rests on the belief that gayness sells to lesbians and gays – which it no doubt does – and that lesbians and gays are an economically powerful consumer market. Cagle's faith in the ability of an "economically powerful" homosexual market to generate mainstream representations of lesbians and gays is based on the same underlying assumption found in Danae Clark's article "Commodity Lesbianism": that representations of lesbians and gays are produced by mainstream media to appeal primarily to homosexuals and not to heterosexuals. Yet, just as Clark admits that lesbians are not the "primary audience for mainstream advertising" and that androgyny is a commodity sold to a largely heterosexual market (192), Cagle goes on to describe how heterosexual women are targeted "with overtly

[female] homoerotic ads" by fashion companies such as Versace (24). In other words, both Clark and Cagle know that "gay sells" to a much bigger, much straighter, much more economically powerful market than just lesbians and gays.

On the December 31, 1993 – the last day of the year in which the mainstream heralded the arrival of "lesbian chic" – the *Toronto Star* ran an article by Frank DeCaro titled "Being 'out' was very 'in' for lesbians, gays in 1993" (C1). DeCaro writes "We marched on Washington. We lusted after kd . . . Being 'out' was never as 'in' as it has been in 1993. Thank God. Thank Martina Navratilova. Thank you" (C1). DeCaro's use of the word "we" implies that "we," the readers, are homosexual; but the title, "Being 'out' was very 'in' for lesbians, gays in 1993" seems to be addressing a different, straighter, "audience." It is undeniable that being "out" was very "in" in 1993 and that it continues to be "in," in spite of the fact that its novelty has worn a bit thin. However, one has to wonder, was/is being "out" suddenly "in" for lesbians and gays, or were/are representations of "out" lesbians and gays suddenly very "in" with heterosexuals.

According to Clark, who seemingly anticipated "lesbians chic" in her article "Commodity Lesbianism," buying androgynous images offers straight women an opportunity to step *outside* the boring, humdrum mainstream. She proposes that straight women "buy" lesbianism because of "the lure of the Other," the foreign, the exotic, the oppressed – an attraction that can only be sustained through the strict maintenance of boundaries between the Other and ourselves. As I discussed earlier in Chapter Two, we have to know who the Other is, what customs and habits are foreign or exotic, before we can transgress the boundaries and step outside. Such clearly demarcated categories are necessary if we want to be able to easily step back inside and

maintain the privileges of dominance. Cagle, who has the benefit of being able to trace the recent boon of representations of lesbians (and, to a lesser extent, gays) for over two years, is able to observe that "androgyny chic" and "lesbian chic" are not outside the mainstream, they *are* mainstream.¹

In Cagle's article it becomes apparent that "androgyny chic" and "lesbian chic" circulate within a different discourse than that of the norm versus the Other. Within this different, newer discursive framework, "lesbian chic" is part of a representational strategy that tells us boundaries no longer exist, that we can no longer identify who is on the inside and who is one the outside because such distinctions no longer matter. Clark's discussion of "inning" is particularly helpful in pulling apart this myth of no boundaries, no distinctions. However, whereas Clark discusses "inning" in "gay window advertising" as a way of *inviting* lesbians into a particular consumer lifestyle, I want to discuss "inning" in terms of "lesbian chic" as an *invitation* to heterosexuals to occupy subject positions that used to be "marginal" or Other, but that are now, as Martha Gever observes, supposedly part of "our [read straight] collective consciousness" (209).

The Cagle article includes an excellent example of what I mean by "inning" in this sense. Cagle quotes Sarah Pettit, editor of *Out* magazine, as saying "Straight women are looking around thinking, 'Is *she* one? Am I one?' And they're kind of titillated by it" (24). Cagle develops this idea of straights questioning their own sexuality and being titillated by the possibilities and adds,

Stallone may be straight and RuPaul may be gay, but what about everybody in between? . . . Not gay per se, but *something*. 'It's

¹ Of course, Clark's article differs from Cagle's in more than timing. Being an academic publication, Clark's article is intended for a different "readership" than Cagle's piece which appeared in a mainstream entertainment magazine.

all become one bright pop blur,' marvels gay playwright-screenwriter Paul Rudnick (*Addams Family Values*; Jeffrey). *Out* concurred: 'It's still a straight world, but straight isn't looking quite as narrow these days' (24).

In this quote, it is fairly clear that the "bright pop blur" of sexualities is not about lesbians and gays but, rather, solely about heterosexuals. The recent popularity of representations of homosexuals in mainstream media seems less about stepping outside the boring, familiar norm to enjoy a foreign, exotic Other than about the thrill of discovering that you, yourself may be the Other. For all the exclamations of revolution and progress, it is still a straight world. Just one good look at the U.S. women's softball team makes it all too clear that the boundaries, if occasionally a little murky, remain as firm as ever. The only real difference is that straightness is occupying a much broader territory. In other words, if we claim that the boundaries do not exist, that oppression is a thing of the past, then straights may transgress the boundaries easier than ever before. Indeed, for some, the boundaries might appear to disappear altogether.

The Limits of Tolerance: backlash

. . . for every gay success, there is a countervailing setback. For every invitation, there is a rebuff. If the view over the past quarter-century suggests that gay progress is inevitable, the picture today suggests that gays may instead be, as their opponents argue, a unique case rather than just another minority group. Far from continuing toward inclusion, gays may already be bumping up against the limits of tolerance (William Henry, *Time*, June 27, 1994, 55).

The above quote by Henry addresses the possibility that increases in lesbian and gay visibility have come at a price and that lesbians and gays are already experiencing a backlash. While Cagle believes "The commercialization of gay culture is probably more than a passing fad — after all, the closer you cut to the heart of consumerism, the more acceptance, if not

outright enthusiasm reveals itself" (31), many lesbians and gays remain unconvinced. Simply because heterosexual consumers buy representations of lesbians and gays does not necessarily mean that straight society has significantly altered their treatment of lesbians and gays. In Jeanie Kasindorf's *New York* magazine feature article titled "Lesbian Chic: The Brave New World of Gay Women," lesbian comedian Kate Clinton shares her fear that "lesbian chic" is nothing more than a passing fancy: "Right now I feel like a novelty act . . . and I hope that's not the case. I hope we will all begin to be seen as more than the story of the moment. I hope we aren't all just having our own fifteen minutes of fame" (37).²

Generally, articles about "lesbian chic" are celebratory and, like Cagle's and DeCaro's pieces, proclaim the overall progressiveness and acceptance of society. However, in spite of their attention to how much things are improving, it is common for the same writers to mention the homophobia lesbians and gays continue to face and to frame this contradiction in terms of levels of tolerance. For example, a month after kd lang's face appeared over the words "Lesbian Chic" on the cover of *New York* magazine, a white, middle-class, well-dressed and equally well-coifed lesbian couple graced the cover of *Newsweek*. The headline reads: "Lesbians: Coming Out Strong." However, also printed on the cover, directly beneath these words -- indeed in the same font size as "Coming Out Strong" -- is the somewhat less celebratory question "What Are the Limits of Tolerance?" Inside *Newsweek* the authors explain: "For all their new pride, lesbians face a lot of old prejudice. The emergence of openly

² Similarly, in her article "Lesbian Chic goes to Hollywood," Joanne Latimer writes that lesbian film maker Rose Troche is also doubtful that "lesbian chic" is any thing more than a fad. Latimer quotes Troche as saying, "Sure, let Hollywood make a lesbian film, or even two . . . [But if] they flop, we probably won't see another one for ten years. The studios will put the blame on everything except the fact that they made a stupid movie that was off the mark . . ." (24).

lesbian couples – publicly affectionate with their children – may test the limits of America's uneasy tolerance of homosexuality" (56).

William Henry, in his article for *Time* titled "Pride and Prejudice," explains that increased lesbian and gay visibility not only exists alongside discourses of progress and acceptance, but actually translates into deepening homophobia and a rise in hate crimes committed against lesbians and gays. He writes,

... at least 30 murders in the U.S. last year were hate crimes, a third aimed at gays and lesbians in places as rural as Humbolt, Nebraska, and as urban as Washington D.C. Says Klanwatch researcher David Webb: "As gays and lesbians become more visible, hate crimes rise in direct correlation. Bigotry today isn't just about the color of one's skin. . . . It has become more acceptable to go after gay men and lesbian women." In Los Angeles County last year hate crimes against gays overtook similar attacks on blacks (June 27, 1994, 57).³

Henry's article outlines the findings of a Time/CNN poll on how Americans feel about homosexuals and homosexual rights. Responding to the flurry of supposed positive representations of lesbians and gays in the media he writes, "it can seem that the gay struggle has already succeeded, or at least that its eventual triumph is ensured. Everywhere one looks, there are signs of gay acceptability unimaginable to the dreamiest of Stonewall patrons" (57). However, as Henry brings to our attention, success and triumph are far from evident in the results of the pole:

When Americans were polled by Time/CNN last week [June, 1994], about 65% thought homosexual rights were being paid too much attention. Strikingly, those who described homosexuality as morally wrong made up the same proportion - 53% - as in a poll in 1978, before a decade and a half of intense gay activism (55).

³ I want to point out that 1993, the year in which hate crimes against gays surpassed racially motivated attacks, is the same year the media proclaimed that being "out" was very "in" and that lesbians had become part of "our collective consciousness."

These figures seem to fit with the results of an Entertainment Weekly/Gallup poll conducted in August, 1995 which found that 60% of Americans would be offended by "a TV show that showed two people of the same sex kissing romantically" (September 8, 1995, 27). Such findings make compelling antidotes to the announcements I have already discussed, such as "In 1995, the gay stream flows freely into the mainstream," or "Being 'out' was very 'in' for lesbians, gays in 1993."

The bottom line is that increased visibility does not necessarily equal "progress" or "acceptance." Lesbians and gays simply can not count on heterosexual viewers/readers to make "progressive," or even compassionate, readings of apparently "positive" (or at least not downright offensive) representations of homosexuals. This point is made clear in Cagle's article when he recounts the story of Donald Suggs, associate director of Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, watching a television program with flamboyant black gay characters in a straight bar: "I used to watch it with my black gay friends and just hoot. . . . Those people weren't laughing at it for the same reasons I was" (25-26). On a similar note, Cagle also writes about the response straight audiences had to the demise of a blatantly gay character in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995): "Audiences laughed and cheered when the King tossed [Prince] Edward's male lover out a window to his death — a reaction that upset even the film's screen-writer, Randall Wallace. 'My expectation was that there would be shock,' he says, 'certainly not one of people applauding'" (27).

Clearly many heterosexuals do enjoy consuming representations of homosexuals; as Cagle writes, "straight audiences are not only embracing gay

characters, they're also laughing at the gay sensibility" (28).⁴ Some might be laughing *with us*, enjoying the "bright pop blur" of sexualities and the fact that "straight isn't quite as narrow" as it used to be. Others might be laughing *at us*, as suggested by the anecdote about the homophobic *Braveheart* audience members applauding as an overtly gay character is killed. But regardless, while homosexuality appears to be the subject of these so-called "positive" representations, the primary subjects of the discourses that surround "androgyny chic" and "lesbian chic" are heterosexuals.

⁴ This observation was made years ago by gay theorists such as Richard Dyer and Thomas Waugh.

Chapter 4: Martina Navratilova

The December 23, 1991 issue of *Sports Illustrated* features a photo spread titled "Ten Living Legends;" the sub-title reads "Luminous images of athletes for the ages, whose virtuosity we can marvel at today" (82-83). Featured are Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretsky, Jack Nicholaus, Jimmy Connors, Nolan Ryan, Cal Ripken Jr., Carl Lewis, Joe Montana, Edwin Moses and Martina Navratilova. Jordan graces the first two pages, but running a close second in terms of placement is Navratilova who takes the third page opposite the introductory text (even before the Great Gretsky). In the introduction, Steve Wulf explains how we, the reader, can identify a living legend: a living legend is someone who warrants the phrase "I saw him play." Wulf writes, "In a way, those four little words are the acid test of who is a sports legend and who is not. When applied to the right athlete, they convey both privilege and reverence. I saw him play" (85). One should give Wulf credit for recognizing that not all legends are men. He also writes that "The 'him' might be a 'her,' . . . but you get the idea." Almost three years later, *Sports Illustrated* celebrated their fortieth anniversary with an issue (September 1, 1994) featuring articles on forty prominent sports stars from the past forty years. Seven of the "Ten Living Legends" make the grade, including Navratilova. The only other women included are Peggy Flemming, Olga Korbut and Billie Jean King.

Interestingly, two out of the four female athletes included in the fortieth anniversary issue are "known" to be lesbians and the only women featured in the "Ten Living Legends" photo spread is included because, we are told, she warrants the phrase "I saw *him* play [emphasis added]." Unlike their straight looking counterparts, one of the ways in which Billy Jean King and Martina

Navratilova's lesbianism has been simultaneously apparent (both visually present and gossiped about) yet denied is through framing such exceptional female athletes as "one of the boys" or, to be more precise, as endowed with manly traits and abilities.¹ In her auto-biography Navratilova recounts a tale which supports this observation: "My friends who are honest with me say they sit in the stands and hear people rooting against me because of my sexuality. One friend said he heard a woman rooting for Chris [Evert] at the U.S. Open finals in 1983. She was shouting: 'Come on, Chris, I want a *real* woman to win [emphasis added]'" (60). Navratilova has also admitted in interviews that some female players accuse her having an unfair advantage over "normal" women because of her supremely fit, muscular body. As Heather Findlay writes, the implication is that "[Navratilova is] 'too good for the women's tour,' . . . [and] that the suped-up immigrant plays like a man and hails from some queer, inhuman family" (17).

Thus, although Martina might not be a "man's man," one way her deviance/difference is made acceptable is by representing her as a man's athlete. The idea that Navratilova has changed women's tennis by bringing an aggressive style (i.e., the men's style) and a muscular physique (i.e., a man's physique) to the game, is a reoccurring theme in media coverage of the athlete. As Paula Witterman writes,

¹ Because she continued to remain closeted, the framing of King as "one of the boys" is far less overt than in the case of Navratilova. However, her match against Bobby Riggs, while touted as a battle between the sexes, was underscored by the knowledge that Riggs was not defeated by a women but, instead, by a lesbian. Being just old enough to recall the media hoopla and word-of-mouth commentary that surrounded this historic match, I easily recall comments made about how King's lesbianism endowed her with the strength and athletic abilities of a male player giving her an added edge over "normal" female players.

Navratilova's contribution to the women's game goes beyond the nearly 170 singles titles and the \$20 million in prize money she has won in her career. . . . She elevated serve and volley tactics to a higher level on the women's tour and made it fashionable for women to display muscle tone. Even traditionalist [Chris] Evert began to pump iron after Martina showed the way (July 11, 1994).

We are meant to accept without question that a serve-and-volleyer, which is what most male players are, is more exciting than a baseliner, which is what most women players were when Navratilova arrived on the tour. The implication is not only that Navratilova improved women's tennis, it is that she improved women's tennis by *masculinizing* it. Henry makes this connection clearer when he writes, "[Navratilova] transformed sports for women by taking on the training discipline of men -- lifting weights, running sprints, following a rigid carbohydrate-loaded diet" (November 30, 1992, 68).

Paul Willis attempts to explain the connection between women's excellence in sport and the belief that female athletes are not "real" women when he writes that "To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because [a female athlete] has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man" (36). Unfortunately, he neglects to elaborate on the implications of becoming, "in certain profound symbolic ways," like a man when he completely ignores the existence of lesbian athletes (thereby suggesting that lesbians do not count). Diane Hamer, on the other hand, explains that "One of the most enduring ideas about lesbians is that they are not truly women. As an identity lesbianism has been masculinized and equated with heterosexual male sexuality -- active, predatory, in pursuit of the 'feminine' woman" (63). Thus, to be a successful lesbian athlete is to be equated with heterosexual male identity both in terms of physical abilities and stamina and in terms of sexual desire.

Navratilova is not thought to be merely mimicking men; the prevailing idea is that there is something "essentially" masculine about her. For example,

in the September 1, 1994 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, Alexander Wolff writes that "Like so much else about her, Navratilova's aggressive style seemed to have been part of her genetic core" (80). This "essential" masculinity accounts for much more than Navratilova's "aggressive" playing style and muscular physique, it accounts for who she is at every level. In her article "A Tale of Two Women," Sally Jenkins describes how

The week before the Slims, [Navratilova] went to a New York Ranger game at the Garden. Afterward she skidded on the ice in cowboy boots, borrowed a stick and took shots at the goal. She even traded Ranger coach Roger Neilson a racket for a pair of hockey skates (November 30, 1992, 71).

These are the type of highjinks we may associate with male athletes, but not female athletes like Gabriela Sabatini or Lisa Leslie. Neither Sabatini nor Leslie are one of the boys, but Martina is.

On the one hand I argue that, because female athleticism and lesbianism are both associated with masculinity, exceptional female athletes who happen to be lesbians are often framed as "one of the boys." At the same time, the fraternity that lesbian athletes have with masculinity and male privilege is far from unproblematic. As Willis writes,

Indeed there is an important element in the popular response to the female athlete, of uncertainty before the deviant, distrust of the strange, dislike of the marginal. As the athlete becomes even more outstanding, she marks herself out as even more deviant. Instead of confirming her identity, success can threaten her with a foreign male identity. In so far as she is affected by popular consciousness – and she can hardly ignore it – the female athlete lives through a severe contradiction (36).

What makes Navratilova a particularly rich subject for analysis is that, as one of the most outstanding female athletes of the twentieth century and a lesbian, mainstream media must negotiate and collapse these powerful contradictions when representing her.

Navratilova herself made great efforts to resolve her contradictory status – or at least to minimize the toll extracted for being "the deviant . . . the strange . . . the marginal" – by attempting to "femme-ify" her image during the mid to late 1980s. With the help of her ex-lover Judy Nelson, who the media repeatedly reminds us is a former Texas beauty queen,² Navratilova donned make-up and more overtly feminine attire. However, despite the effort and minimal success, Navratilova's body seemed to defy "femme-ification." As Diane Hamer explains in "Netting the Press: Playing with Martina," "It has often been said privately amongst lesbians that Martina in women's clothes looks like a man in drag" (70).

Lesbians are not the only ones to notice the paradoxical nature of the 1980s' "femme-ified" Martina image. Hamer explains that "The irony of the visual image of a tall athletic woman in feminine dress is not lost on [the media]." Thus, Hamer deduces that attempts to "femme-ify" Navratilova are not quite successful. Indeed, sports writers constantly make reference to Navratilova's muscular physique, describing how her "arms were rippling" (Henry, 1992, 68), calling her a "finely tuned piece of machinery" (Jenkins, November 30, 1992, 70), and writing about her "lithe, muscular figure" and "carefully tuned athletic body" (Bricker, November 16, 1994, E1).

In short, Navratilova's amazing athletic abilities and lesbianism separate her from other female athletes and underline her deviance/difference. Yet, at the same time, Navratilova's "out" lesbian status produces a different relation to her gender that seems to work with, not against, her status as a true champion.

² For example, *People Weekly* describes Nelson as "the honey-blond former Texas beauty queen" (July 8, 1991, 28). Interestingly, in "Netting the Press," Diane Hamer points out that while Nelson is frequently described in mainstream media as being blonde, "Martina is never described as blonde" (68). Hamer deduces that "Clearly a quintessential femininity, signified by bloneness, does not fit the description of Martina as lesbian" (68).

An article in the November 30, 1992 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, titled "A Tale of Two Women," compares Martina Navratilova to Monica Seles the then number one ranked woman in tennis.³ Author Sally Jenkins writes,

The applause in Madison Square Garden was a striking tribute to two careers headed in different directions. Martina Navratilova, at that age of 36, basked in the crowd's standing ovation, while next to her stood impatient Monica Seles, half her age, a fast forward champion. Navratilova is the greatest women's player in history, but nobody has won as many titles as Seles has at such an early age (70).

While the above quote makes it appear as though the tale in question is the story of two astounding athletes, the comparison being made between Navratilova and Seles is not of skill levels, styles of play, or even of career histories – it is a comparison made to determine who is more deserving of the label champion. The criteria for this comparison is apparent when Jenkins writes

Standing next to the supremely fit Navratilova, Seles resembles a coach potato. Then there is the hair, which, in its latest incarnation, is twisted into brown nubs better suited for the head of a giraffe. One of her accomplishments this year was to make *People* magazine's worst-dressed list. Last weekend she was the subject of a *Saturday Night Live* skit that mocked her trademark grunt (70).

It is obvious that Jenkins feels Seles fails, not as a tennis player, but as an exemplary model of a female athlete. It is not that she is too masculine, or not feminine enough, it is that Seles lacks the "class" of a champion. Jenkins respect for Navratilova, on the other hand, does not seem to be in question. Instead, she is described as "the all-time leader in singles titles, men's or women's, with 161;" as having "lectured tirelessly on Colorado's Amendment

³ The article appeared just after Navratilova's crushing defeat at the hands of Seles during the Virginia Slims Championships, 7-5, 6-3, 6-1.

2;" and as being "An avowed liberal" (70-71). Both women may be called champions, but Navratilova is presented as better suited for and more deserving of the title.

In this chapter, I will explore the complexities of Navratilova's dual position as champion and lesbian. Looking over mainstream press and magazine articles on Navratilova from the years leading up to, during and immediately following her retirement from singles play, I trace four reoccurring themes by which Navratilova's position is negotiated: 1) Martina as star athlete; 2) Martina as more-American than the average American; 3) Martina as an outspoken political activist; and 4) Martina as lesbian. These themes flow in and out of each other, each used to support the others, all enmeshed in discourses on sport, gender, nationalism, activism, and sexual deviance.

I have focused on the theme of Navratilova's "greatness" to introduce this chapter because her undeniable status as star athlete underpins and runs across the three other themes. For example, her praises are sung in a variety of sports articles. William Henry writes, "Her standing as the all-time greatest in her sport seems beyond challenge" (November 30, 1992, 68). She is described as "the greatest women's [tennis] player in history" by Sally Jenkins (November 30, 1992, 70) and as "one of the greatest of female athletes" by Charles Bricker (November 16, 1994, E1). And Laura Vecsey tells us that, "As Navratilova retires, tennis possibly is losing its greatest player ever" (November 20, 1994, D6). However, more interesting than this praise itself, is how it works with and against Navratilova the lesbian, the activist and the consummate American.

Cars, Cowboys and Consumption: Martina as an American

When [Navratilova] left Czechoslovakia for good, in 1975 at the age of 18, she did so with a vengeance, partaking of all manner of Western goods. At one point she would own seven cars. With her passion for dogs and the Dallas Cowboys, and her support of the restoration of the Statue of liberty, it's hard to think of a native-born athlete more publicly American than she (Alexander Wolff, *Sports Illustrated*, September 1, 1994).

As I mention earlier, one of the themes running through media coverage of Navratilova over the past four years is that she is an exemplary model of Americanness. Wolff, in the above quote, suggests that Navratilova's status as a model American has something to do with her ability to be a consumer of cars, a fan of the Dallas Cowboys, and a supporter of Lady Liberty. While this observations seems accurate, I would like to add that Navratilova's acceptance as American is also strongly tied to her amazing athletic abilities.

Curry Kirkpatrick makes this connection clear in his response to Navratilova's claim that "I was born to be an American." Kirkpatrick writes, "Navratilova has turned into far more than merely one of us. She is mentor, conscience, role model, our own World Icon. The best female athlete of all time, arguably" (November 14, 1994, 58). According to Kirkpatrick, Navratilova's Americanness is not only about her ability to represent American values as a mentor, a conscience, a role model and an icon but, perhaps most importantly, it is about her ability to be the best at what she does. The link between Navratilova's status as "the best female athlete of all time" and her Americanness is part of a tradition wherein successful "foreign" athletes can

easily be "framed" as American.⁴ For example, in an article about Russian players in the NHL, Michael Farber argues that "North American resentment over the loss of jobs to citizens of the erstwhile Evil Empire has mellowed into acceptance of the fact that the best hockey league in the world should have the best players" (May 29, 1995, 31).

Of course, some athletes make better American icons than others. Excellence in their sport might be why an athlete has been *b(r)ought* over to play in the U.S., but as the representative of a nation, she/he should represent the nation's social and economic values. As Wolff points out, Navratilova's extraordinary capacity to consume "all manner of Western goods" is a key part of conveying her American nationality. The fact that Navratilova makes it known that she once owned "a Toyota Supra, a Pontiac J, a 733 BMW, a silver Mercedes, a Porsche 928, a 1965 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, and a white 1976 Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible" (Navratilova, 228) enables her to be "framed" as an icon of American values in spite of her potentially incompatible status as a lesbian.

Indeed, her deviance actually enhances this process. While there is a contradiction between her desirable traits, i.e., her supreme athleticism and love of cars, Cowboys and consumption, and her sexuality, I argue that "lesbian chic" and a discourse of a homosexuality of no importance is one of the ways in which this contradiction is negotiated. In the era of chic dykes, Navratilova's high profile, high consumption lifestyle works with the fact that she is a "known" lesbian. In this sense, Navratilova is not *b(r)ought* into the nation in spite of her lesbianism, but because her dykey-ness has now become

⁴ This tradition of a country embracing "foreign" athletes as one of their own is certainly not exclusive to America. My point is that this process is part of mainstream media treatment of Navratilova.

part of her appeal. On the other hand, we are told that her difference/deviance does not really matter because she is an exemplary "citizen." Navratilova herself frequently plays with this dichotomy between her model Americanness and her lesbianism: for example, advocating the right of lesbians and gays to serve in the American military, she is quoted as asking, "Wouldn't you want me on the front lines?" (Jenkins, 1992, 71).

Conscience of a Nation: Martina as Activist

Curry Kirkpatrick writes that part of what makes Navratilova American is her role as the conscience of a nation. Kirkpatrick's reference to Navratilova as a conscience can be read as a comment on her recent (since the early 1990s) political activism. As Diane Hamer writes,

Martina . . . has shifted into a more political discourse. The early 1990s . . . has signaled the beginning of Martina's own inscriptions into the discourses generated about her within popular culture. Until now Martina had been an object invested by the discursive maneuvering of the tabloid press. But now a shift occurs, in which Martina begins to write her own narratives of sexual identity which eclipse those provided by the popular press (73).

While political activism of a sort can be made to mesh with American nationalism, it rarely fits with sport stardom. As I mention in Chapter 3, sport is supposedly about "real," "natural" physical excellence that can be seen and measured and not about belief systems or ideology. Thus, world class athletes seldom go out on a limb and make comments or support causes that could be construed as political or controversial. As Navratilova asks rhetorically in one interview, "Have you ever heard Michael Jordan state his opinion on anything he feels strongly about?" (Kort, 50). It is not that sport or athletes are

apolitical; rather, it is that the discourse of sport as governed by the laws of "nature" is better suited to some belief systems than others. For example, while athletes like Donovan Bailey and Bruny Surin are thrown into the media spotlight for making the simple observation that Canada "is as blatantly racist as the United States" (*The Montreal Gazette*, July 17, 1996, F1), athletes like Dallas Cowboy Michael Irvin are heralded as upstanding examples of American athleticism and manhood for tapping into pro-nuclear family rhetoric.⁵ What is so interesting about Navratilova is that, by being "out" and outspoken, she has actively and openly challenged these dominant discourses.

Perhaps one of the most publicized examples of this challenge is Navratilova's interview with the *New York Post* in which she commented on the media's response to Magic Johnson's revelation that he is HIV-positive. According to Jenkins,

[Navratilova] had told the *New York Post* that Johnson was not a hero for having contracted the AIDS virus, that his acknowledged promiscuity had been irresponsible behaviour and that women and gays are treated with 'a very big-time double standard' by the public and corporate America. She also said that if a woman athlete who had contracted the AIDS virus admitted that she 'had been with 100 or 200 men, they'd call her a slut, and the corporations would drop her like a lead balloon' (December 2, 1991, 58).

How does Navratilova get away with being so outspoken? Or, does Navratilova get away with being so outspoken? According to the media, Navratilova says she has nothing to lose, but the implication is that she has lost it all any way. The idea that Navratilova is denied major endorsement deals because of her homosexuality and thus can "afford" to be outspoken is

⁵ Irvin is repeatedly depicted as a family man media in coverage of his indictment on a felony drug charge in July 1996. For example, the football player is shown holding his 8 month old daughter and is quoted as saying "I shall work on being a better father. I shall work on being a better husband" (*The Montreal Gazette*, July 17, 1996, F1).

repeated in mainstream media again and again. For example, Jenkins goes on to write of Navratilova's remarks about Johnson:

Navratilova decided that nothing else can harm her, particularly because her openly gay life-style had long ago cost her any endorsements much beyond the bare essentials: rackets, shoes, socks.

'How can it harm me,' she said about her speaking out, 'when I have hardly any endorsements anyway? Some people say I should keep quiet because of endorsements I *might* get *someday*. Well, I'm not getting them. If I feel strongly, I say it. I know I can do a lot more good by being vocal than by staying quiet. I'd have a whole lot more money if I lied, but I wouldn't enjoy spending it' (December 2, 1991, 58-59).

Alexander Wolff echoes Navratilova's own words when he writes, "Yet without any corporate tune callers, Navratilova was free to promote her own beliefs, from animal rights to environmental awareness . . . " (September 1, 1994, 80).

Navratilova's "outness" and outspokenness might be partially the result of her belief that she has nothing to lose, but Jenkins suggests there is more strategy involved in Navratilova's activism. She concludes her comparison between Seles and Navratilova by describing Seles realization that, as a "public" persona "'You learn that you can never be smart enough. And you can't just blurt words out'" and adds, "Unless, like Navratilova, you know how and when to blurt them" (December 2, 1991, 59). Through looking at how and when Navratilova is "out" and outspoken, I want to tie her choices and her timing to broader discourses on social activism and sexual difference, particularly to a discourse of a homosexuality of no importance. Specifically, I want to argue that while this discourse has foregrounded Navratilova's lesbianism and at the same denied its relevance, Navratilova's ongoing activism around gender and sexuality has worked to re-politicized her lesbianism, making it an issue that just won't go away.

Diane Hamer clearly marks Navratilova's relationship with Judy Nelson as a turning point in her self-representation. She specifically focuses on Navratilova's embrace with Nelson immediately after her ninth Wimbledon win in 1990 and implies that this embrace was the key moment when Navratilova decided to be unabashedly "out." Hamer writes,

It was a significant moment for [Navratilova] and a thrilling one for every lesbian viewer around the world. . . . After the winning game, and in a move which echoed Pat Cash's triumphant dash through the spectators to hug his wife three year before, Martina leapt through the crowds to embrace each member of her entourage in turn. Viewing this spectacle on my television the anticipation was excruciating as I waited for her to reach her lover, Judy. I was not disappointed as the two clung together in a passionate embrace which filled the whole screen. I thrilled to the knowledge that tens of millions of viewers around the world were at that moment watching two lesbians publicly display their love for each other (74).

She goes on to write that "no one would ever see [the embrace] repeated on any sporting round-ups" and that "Punishment for Martina's transgressive behavior was swift and damning"(74) — referring to Margaret Court's well publicized outrage over Navratilova's openly homosexual behavior.

Hamer thus interprets Navratilova's embracing of Nelson as a personal decision to embrace her lesbianism. She writes that "[The embrace] signaled [Navratilova's] refusal to disguise any longer the nature of her relationship with Judy or to compromise about the meanings surrounding her sexuality. In short, she began to flaunt it" (75). Certainly, Hamer's response to seeing Navratilova embrace Nelson during live television coverage of her ninth Wimbledon win deserves some attention. I distinctly recall having set my alarm clock so I could watch the "live" coverage of Navratilova defeating Zina Garrison back in 1990. I also remember waiting to see if Navratilova would indeed embrace her lover in front of "the world" and then leaping to my feet and hooting wildly when she

did it. However, I question the assumption that this event, that Navratilova's decision to be unabashedly "out," was an individual decision only.

Clearly Navratilova made a personal decision to be "out" and to embrace her lover in "public." This decision was, and continues to be, a remarkably brave one. However, what larger, social factors came into play to make that personal decision possible at that historical moment? For example, I doubt that twenty years earlier Billie Jean King would have even imagined making a similar decision.⁶ Nor would I, as a viewer, have waited expectantly for her to do so. Navratilova chose this moment because she correctly gauged that social responses to openly lesbian behavior are different than they were at the beginning of her career and that the "public" was somehow ready for this embrace.

For example, Navratilova's "coming out" in 1981 – a mere nine days after having secured her U.S. citizenship – is quite different than her "outness" and political activism in the early to mid-1990s. In fact, it seems pretty clear that had Navratilova not admitted to being a lesbian in '81, she would have been "outed" any way. Just months before she became a U.S. citizen, Navratilova had given an "off-the-record" interview about her relationship with author Rita Mae Brown to Steve Goldstein of the New York *Daily News*. She describes this interview in her 1985 autobiography (co-authored by George

⁶ I am not saying that, in the '90s, it is now safe to be an "out" athlete or that the decision to be "out" is an easy one. In spite of recent homo-friendly discourses in mainstream media, there is still tremendous pressure for female professional tennis players to remain closeted. The media comments endlessly on Conchita Martinez's "close friendship" with doubles player Gigi Fernandez. TV sports commentators report that Fernandez attends as many of Martinez's games as is possible and vice versa. As well, Martinez frequently looks to Fernandez in the stands for support and the media proclaims a marked improvement in Martinez' confidence since becoming "friends" with Fernandez. However, neither player has openly admitted to being a lesbian and the media does not "out" them as lovers despite the obviousness of their relationship.

Vecsey) as a "ticking . . . time bomb" (230) which eventually went off.

Navratilova writes, "I still maintain that the publication of our conversation was a betrayal of a trust, but I also blame myself. It was gullible and naïve of me to have shared my strongest feelings with a reporter who had other priorities than my security, my happiness" (235).

The Goldstein interview hit as scandal and innuendo, suggesting that a terrible truth (something we had suspected all along) had been revealed. In her autobiography, Navratilova makes it clear that she was not pleased with the media's attention to her sexuality and she spends the next several pages after her discussion of the Goldstein interview emphasizing her own feminine image:

People judge you by appearances, and since I was all woman underneath, I finally figured I might as well start dressing the part. . . . I know I'm stronger than other women and faster than most, but I'm not bigger than a lot of them. I was working out and eating better and I felt confident and healthy and feminine. Put it this way: I liked standing out there in front of 18,000 people in my bright new orange and gold outfits, with a touch of blusher on my cheeks. I felt good about myself, better than I ever had (240).

This Navratilova — the one who wrote (or approved of) the above words in 1985 — is a far cry from the 1990s activist, the first woman to wear shorts instead of a skirt at Wimbledon, the woman who so vehemently commented on the media's response to Johnson's HIV-status.

Navratilova has been a lesbian all along. This fact was reported in the media for nine years before she leapt into the stands and embraced her lesbian lover. And yet, it was not until the early 1990s that the "out" and outspoken Navratilova emerged and began to receive positive recognition for, as well as sordid gossip about, her sexuality. In this sense, her 1990 Wimbledon win offered the ideal moment at which to become unabashedly "out" for a combination of factors: to begin with, her status as a champion was already

firmly in place; secondly, there was a shift occurring in social discourses about sexuality; and finally, because of her lesbianism, and despite her champion status, she was still not reaping any endorsement earnings.

Thus, on the one side, Navratilova's activism ties into her role as a national icon. When she speaks out on social and political issues, and over issues of gender equality, she can be framed as the conscience of a nation. On the other hand, her activism is also closely enmeshed with her sexuality – despite the contradiction between her "out," "masculine," lesbian image and American moral values. In this second aspect of Navratilova's activism, it is her very physicality as a lesbian that is taken for activism: her muscles, her playing style and, most importantly, her choice of shorts over the traditional tennis skirt – the skirts that even powerhouse players like Conchita Martinez and Jana Novotna continue to sport.

A Homosexuality of Importance: Martina as lesbian

In an article on Navratilova, titled "The Passion of a Champion," Curry Kirkpatrick writes

Moreover, in the past year Navratilova has abandoned any pretense to, as a friend says, 'frilliness.' This has resulted in yet another radical Martina makeover, this one in haberdashery: stark business suit, then jeans, in interviews with Barbara Walters and David Letterman; and for tournament play, floppy golf shirts and ugly black gym shorts.

But if this is about accentuating some lifestyle manifesto – *Hey, this is me. I don't care* – Navratilova has got it all wrong. It's we who don't care anymore. Acceptance is history: her public shows up now with honor and respect abounding . . . (58).

In this passage, Kirkpatrick raises two main points that need to be addressed. First, he identifies a change in Navratilova's "image" – from a pretense of

"frilliness" to a radical makeover in "haberdashery." By definition the word frilliness implies a feminine style and haberdashery implies male middle-to-upper-class style. However, after using haberdashery, Kirkpatrick goes on to describe one of Navratilova's outfits as "floppy" and "ugly," two words that are antonymous with haberdashery. Thus Kirkpatrick maintains a binary opposition between proper femininity (frilliness) and proper masculinity (haberdashery) while pointing out that Navratilova once failed at the former and now fails at the latter.

Kirkpatrick's argument is exemplary of a discourse of a homosexuality of no importance. He focuses attention on Navratilova's image – in particular, her shorts – and yet, at the same time, denies that her image is of any relevance. Furthermore, while he addresses Navratilova's increased "masculine" appearance, he makes no direct connection between this appearance and her image as a lesbian. He does not need to state that there is a connection because "knowledge" of Navratilova's lesbianism is ever-present. In this way, Kirkpatrick positions Navratilova's lesbianism as of no importance – not worth mentioning – even though it underpins exactly what he is dismissing and why he would have support in deriding her clothing and image choice in the first place.

Kirkpatrick's "straight mind" cannot conceive of a style or image outside of the binaries woman/man, feminine/masculine. Navratilova is a woman but she cannot be properly feminine because there is something "essentially masculine" about her, i.e., she is a dyke. Likewise, while there is something "essentially masculine" about her, Navratilova cannot truly be a "real" man because she is . . . well, a woman. Kirkpatrick makes it clear that masculinity on Navratilova does not fit any better than femininity does and concludes that this misfit is "floppy" and "ugly." He fails to take into consideration that firstly,

Navratilova's "new image" might be something other than failed masculinity and secondly, what makes her so unattractive to him is exactly what makes her very attractive to other lesbians.

Unlike Kirkpatrick, lesbians love seeing Navratilova in shorts. By wearing shorts she is not only defying the enforced feminine image of women's tennis but she is also marketing herself as distinctly lesbian. Furthermore, she is embracing – even flaunting – her lesbian body. As lesbian author JoAnne Loulan replies when asked what makes Navratilova so sexy, "[Martina] wore shorts years ago, and then she went to the skirts, and now she's back. I do love that. That's fabulous" (*Girlfriends*, January/February 1995, 18). While mainstream sport writers perpetually describe Navratilova's muscular, athletic body as masculine and machine-like – attributes which apparently explain both her athleticism and her sexual difference/deviance – lesbian writers in lesbian and gay media⁷ describe the same body as a lesbian body and, thus, an object of desire. In *Out* magazine's "Out 100" for 1994, Anne-Christine D'Adesky describes Navratilova "As a serve 'n' volley goddess with thighs-to-die-for" (78) and concludes her piece with the line "Hey, she's got the legs" (79). Similarly, in her set up of "The Advocate Interview: Martina Navratilova," Michele Kort describes Navratilova as being in "forearm-revealing T-shirt chic" (October 5, 1993, 46).

The second point that I want to address from the Kirkpatrick passage is his claim that Navratilova's change in image is about "accentuating some life style manifesto – *Hey, this is me. I don't care*" and that she has "got it all wrong." Why does Kirkpatrick think she is wrong? Because, he claims, it is

⁷ By lesbian and gay media I am referring to the high production value American lesbian and gay magazines, made by lesbians and gays for lesbians and gays, that are circulated across the U.S. and Canada.

"we" who do not care anymore. I want to untangle two inter-locking aspects of Kirkpatrick's line of reasoning here. To begin with, Kirkpatrick deploys a universal, disembodied "we" thereby claiming to speak for everyone, not just himself, when, in fact, it is quite clear that his particular perspective is "straight" (or at the very least, not lesbian). Second, his belief that Navratilova is "wrong" in thinking that her lesbianism is about her. However, not everyone fits the "we" in his argument. "We," for example, are not the myriad of lesbian journalists, writers, tennis fans or fans of Navratilova's who have no interest in tennis at all. Indeed, lesbians appear to care a great deal about both Navratilova's lesbianism and her "lifestyle manifesto." According to lesbian media, Navratilova is "Our hero Martina" (*Curve*, January/February 1996, vol. 6, no. 1, 5), "the world's most famous lesbian" (*Curve*, January/February 1996, vol. 6, no. 1, 40), and "[a] leading light for the lesbian and gay community" (*Out*, December/January 1995, 78).

Furthermore, it is not just lesbians who care about Navratilova's lesbianism. In spite of Kirkpatrick's declaration that "we don't care anymore," all the mainstream sports (magazine or newspaper) articles on Navratilova's retirement at some point mention her lesbianism – including Kirkpatrick's piece in which he dedicates one quarter of his one page article to the subject. Reporters address the press scandals that have plagued Navratilova throughout her career, including Judy Nelson's law suit for palimony. For example, Charles Bricker discusses "[Navratilova's] trauma-filled life [being] laid open by . . . a vicious press salivating over details of her homosexual love affairs and once by the palimony suit of a jilted lover" (November 16, 1994, E1).⁸ Many others gleefully recount a humorous exchange between

⁸ Ironically, Bricker makes no connection between his own mention of Navratilova's lesbianism and those of "a vicious press."

Navratilova and an unnamed reporter: "Male sportswriter: 'Martina, are you still a lesbian?' Navratilova: 'Are you still the alternative?'" (Alexander Wolff, September 19, 1994, 81).

Some writers discuss Navratilova's lesbianism in a way that seems most at odds with Kirkpatrick's statement that "we don't care anymore" -- they claim that Navratilova has earned a place in history not because of her amazing record of performances as an athlete but, rather, *because* she is a lesbian. According to William Henry, Navratilova's "most lasting legacy is to have lived as an open homosexual while competing" (November 30, 1992, 68). Laura Vecsey repeats this sentiment when she writes, "If anything, Navratilova's place in history will be next to men like Arthur Ashe and Kareem Abdul-Jabaar, who spoke out about racism not only in sports but society" (November 20, 1994, D6). In short, it is difficult to believe that journalists and writers would continue to write about Navratilova's lesbianism if they, as well as their readers, no longer cared about it.

To sum up, who is the "we" who no longer cares about lesbianism? I believe "we" are Kirkpatrick's assumed-to-be-straight readers who he knows care a great deal about it -- if "we" did not, he would not write about it. When Kirkpatrick writes that "Acceptance is history . . . ," he means that Navratilova's "outness" and outspokenness is unnecessary because her lesbianism does not matter. "We'll" accept her in spite of her lesbianism. However, the terms of "our" acceptance are that Navratilova's lesbianism is constructed as being of no importance. "We" take pleasure in a world in which people are different, but the pleasure belongs to "us" and not Navratilova (or her lesbian fans) because "we" still dictate the parameters of what, and whom, "we" find pleasurable.

* * *

On November 15, 1994 Martina Navratilova was defeated 6-4, 6-2, by Gabriela Sabatini at the Virginia Slims Championships at Madison Square Garden. It was Navratilova's farewell game, touted as the last singles match the nine-time Wimbledon champion would ever play. That evening, during a post-game ceremony, a commemorative banner was hung in Navratilova's honor — the first such banner raised to an athlete who was not a member of the New York Knicks or Rangers. During the ceremony, Navratilova was presented with a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a retirement gift from the tournament's sponsors. Notably, the gift was rolled out into the arena by two female NYPD officers. While the banner serves to recognize an individual athlete's amazing career, the Harley-Davidson, and the manner in which it was presented, implies a recognition of much more. On November 15, 1994, Martina Navratilova — the *lesbian* tennis star — was "retired."

But as *Sports Illustrated* points out in its November 28, 1994 issue, "Buried in pre-event publicity was a minor detail: The banner wouldn't go up and stay up . . . but would be hoisted only during tennis events. There is just one tennis event at the Garden — the Slims" (12). *Sports Illustrated* asks the obvious question: was the banner ceremony a tribute to Navratilova's career or a ploy "to sell more tickets to the Slims session on Nov. 15" (12)? Although it is certainly significant that the banner was taken down as soon as the Virginia Slims Championships ended, the media by and large ignored this fact and overwhelmingly represented the event as "pure tribute."⁹ Even if the banner had remained hanging after the Slims, it would have been impossible to separate tribute from publicity stunt.

⁹ In fact, I did not find any other article (save the *Sports Illustrated* one I have already mentioned) that brings the dubiousness of the Garden's banner ceremony to light.

What is interesting about the ceremony in terms of my project is the way in which it highlights the media's double recognition of Navratilova as both a lesbian and a sports celebrity. This double recognition shows how mainstream media negotiate a myriad of contradictions and inconsistencies in producing Navratilova's "image" and in managing her fit within the dominant conceptual scheme. This negotiation consists of holding together, or at least balancing off, two historically incompatible "images" of sexual deviant and star athlete. The aspect of the ceremony that grabbed my attention was the presentation of a motorcycle by two female police officers. This gift, and manner in which it was presented, encapsulates the three levels of media treatment that work along with, and cut across, the theme of Navratilova as a star athlete. First, the huge American-made motorcycle fits well with Navratilova's known love, and consumption, of automobiles and all things Western. At the same time, the Harley also ties into Navratilova image as a lesbian — after all, what is more dykey than a muscular woman on a really big bike? Furthermore, the activist aspect of Navratilova's visible sexuality and gender challenge seem to be acknowledged in this move.

But how significant is all this when the banner is not permanent and Paul Munick, vice president of athletics and family entertainment at the Garden, is quoted as saying "With all due respect to Martina, [the Garden is] not her home" (*Sports Illustrated*, November 28, 1994, 12). In light of what *Sports Illustrated* refers to as the "Banner Hang-up," one has to question how such a *mise-en-scene* was possible and who actually benefited from it? Certainly the sponsors of the Virginia Slims Championships who took full advantage of the flash and potential for hype derived from Navratilova's lesbianism and magnificent career as a sports diva. Also, all the "in the know" heterosexual viewers and fans who had the thrill of enjoying the subtle recognition of

Navratilova's sexuality while paying homage to the star. At the same time, it is pretty clear who got burned: "'It seems like more trouble to put it up and take it down than to just leave it up,' said Navratilova, who was reluctant to make an issue of the matter" (November 28, 1994, 12).

Conclusion or Confessions of a Skirt Chasing Academic

On July 17, the day after Michael Farber's "shocking" article about Donovan Bailey hit news stands, I asked my partner Josephine to pick up the "offending" issue of *Sports Illustrated*. While at the local magazine/news store, she ran into a friend of ours, Sheryl, who was perusing various tabloids for, she claims, pedagogical reasons. While they were browsing the racks, said friend happened to discover a two page spread on Martina Navratilova in which the tennis star is depicted planting a lip lock on Hunter Reno. Reno being none other than U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno's fashion model niece (*Globe*, July 23, 1996, 2-3). When news of this discovery reached me, I immediately ran out to purchase the *Globe*, in the hopes that this media representation of Navratilova might inspire a conclusion for my thesis.

I am not sure what I expected to find in the *Globe*: innuendo and rampant intrigue? Nor was I sure what I was going to do with it when I found it. Quite simply, I was looking for – praying for – an impetus to a pithy, insightful summation. What I found instead was a frightfully banal portrayal of Navratilova and Reno kissing – so banal, it does not even warrant a front page headline in spite of the fact that it is two pages in length. The "Photo Exclusive," better re-named the semiotics of lesbian kissing 101, is comprised of five photos, each with a tedious narrative blurb. For example, the caption for photo number four reads, "Martina makes some points with her arm around Hunter" (3). The short text piece accompanying the "Photo Exclusive," makes a feeble attempt to generate scandal around Navratilova, describing her as a "gay star" and a "skirt chasing tennis queen" (2). But all in all, the pictures speak for themselves: Navratilova, the lesbian, stands in a doorway and kisses a woman good-bye.

The only aspect of the encounter between Navratilova and Reno that the writer(s) successfully inject with some spice is Reno's ambiguous sexuality. Reno is described as "a 145-pound former high school soccer goalie who wears men's size 9 1/2 Gucci loafers, and [who] had a reputation as 'a bone crusher' on the field" (2). In short, Navratilova is not very interesting in this piece because the photographs suggest nothing more than what we already 'know': she is a "gay star." What makes Reno interesting is what we do not know about her, but now may suspect: that Janet Reno's niece might, just might, be a big old dyke. While Navratilova's 1990s, unabashedly "out" persona does not make for the tabloid headlines that her 1980s, ashamedly "outed" persona once did, speculation over who is a homosexual is still hot tabloid news.

Further to this line of reasoning, I would like to shift attention from "Martina's new love Match," to another photo-exposé that actually warrants a headline on the cover of the same issue of the *Globe*. The headline reads, "Talk Queen As You've Never Seen Her: 219 lb. Rosie O'Donnell's strange secret life" and is accompanied by two photos of O'Donnell and a female friend in casual summer attire. Initially, I believed this feature was going to be about O'Donnell's excessive weight, with speculation about diet attempts and the problems it has caused her in terms of personal relationships, etc.. After all, O'Donnell seems to have replaced Elizabeth Taylor and Oprah Winfrey as the target of America's obsessive fatty-bashing. But the words "strange secret life" seemed out of sync with "219 lb. Rosie." I sensed that the *Globe* was implying that there is something "stranger" than O'Donnell's waist size to be noted.

In fact, O'Donnell's weight is not the topic of the two page photo-spread at all. Fifty percent of the two pages in question are filled with a photograph of O'Donnell with a female friend on a motorcycle. In large, red, block letters yet

another headline reads, "Rough Rider Rosie: Talk queen has a gay old time on secret getaway with playmates [emphasis added]" (36-37). The remaining photographs show O'Donnell and other female friends on wave runners (jet skis), a rented boat, a board-walk, etc.. A short text accompanies the "Photo Exclusive," in which writer Diane Albright tells us that the woman on the back of the "chopper" is Michele Blakely. Blakely is described as O'Donnell's "friend," "girlfriend," "ex-roommate," "special friend" and, in reference to the rented boat, "first mate" (37). The other women are referred to as "gal pals" and it is stressed that "no guys, guys, guys, were around" the "rough and tough girls" during their "all-girl marathon," i.e., vacation (36-37).

The implication is clear: O'Donnell is a lesbian. And yet, strangely enough, Albright never once states that O'Donnell is a lesbian or even that she is rumoured to be a lesbian. Only through innuendo, word play, signifiers of lesbianism (such as the motorcycle and the noted absence of men) is her lesbianism implied. The treatment of O'Donnell is particularly striking in comparison to the spread on Navratilova. In the case of Navratilova, the representation is of someone who is "out." We "know" she is a lesbian and she knows we "know." Thus, her "outness" makes tabloid reports about her lesbianism nothing short of humdrum – that is, unless through association she taints some other noteworthy individual. O'Donnell, on the other hand, is "closeted." But we still believe we "know" she is a lesbian because we can "read" the signs, i.e., we "know" what it means when a woman rides a motorcycle, has a female roommate, or vacations with other women. Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge.

My point is that, in the *Globe*, it is not the act of *being* a lesbian that matters, it the act of speculating about who is (and who is not) a lesbian. That is to say, the thrill is being able to figure it "out." If knowledge is sexual

knowledge and secrets are sexual secrets, then there has "developed one particular sexuality that [is] distinctively constituted as secrecy" (Sedgwick, 1993c, 49). And being able to figure that secret "out" is not about who is (and who is not) a lesbian per se, but is about the careful management of information about that "knowledge" (Sedgwick, 1993c).

As I discussed earlier, Eve Sedgwick addresses how lesbians and gays are perpetually placed in the situation of having to manage information about our sexuality: do we "come out" or do we try to "pass" as straight (1993c, 45-46). Likewise, as is demonstrated in the *Globe*, mainstream media further manages information about our sexuality through scandals, speculation and innuendo; and when we attempt to thwart this process by being unabashedly "out," the attention to our "outness" is shifted to further scrutinize those who remain "in." Being "out" may indeed be a hot cultural commodity in the 1990s, however, the fact that lesbians have increased media cache does not detract from the fact that we do not set the terms of our of visibility. The same tired, old binaries that we thought our increased visibility would erode -- "in"/"out," subject/object, heterosexual/homosexual -- remain valiantly intact. As Sedgwick quotes D. A. Miller as writing, " . . . the phenomenon of the 'open secret' does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmic recovery" (1993c, 46).

At the same time that I make this analysis as an academic, I am aware that as a media consumer and a lesbian, I often enjoy representations of lesbians in mainstream media. For example, I was thrilled to discover the *Globe* exposé on Rosie O'Donnell because the possibility that yet another celebrity is a dyke is distinctly alluring. There is a seductiveness in being able to see a part of one's own life, especially given that lesbians are starved for

representations of ourselves. However, that desire is too frequently reduced to a simple celebration of any increase in visibility. In this thesis, I have tried to maintain the pleasure of consumption while developing a critical engagement with the representations. Joan Nestle writes that "By allowing ourselves to be portrayed as the good deviant, the respectable deviant, we lose more than we will ever gain" (123). I believe this quote addresses precisely what is at stake when lesbians move from being "framed" as "the invisible homosexuals" to be "framed" as having a homosexuality of no importance.

* * *

Instead of providing closure, the process of writing this thesis has opened up new areas for my future research. For this project, I chose to focus on representations of lesbian personas, specifically Navratilova, and did not discuss in detail characters created to be lesbians, i.e., how lesbianism is represented within sit-coms or dramas. In making this decision, I was aware of the significance of the difference between lesbians and lesbianism, however, tackling this issue was too large for the confines of my project. One option for future research is to explore the representation of lesbianism thereby further developing the interpretative framework which I constructed in this thesis and expanding the analysis of the recent phenomenon known as "lesbian chic."

Another aspect of this thesis which unexpectedly grabbed my interest was the relationship between nationalism, consumption, gender and sexuality as they are configured around sports icons. I touch on these issues in the section "Cars, Cowboys and Consumption: Martina as American" because these concepts are constantly linked in mainstream representations of Navratilova. However, when I researched this area in order to develop my

analysis, I found surprisingly little theory addressing the imbrication of all these terms. Because the focus of this thesis is representations of lesbians, I set aside the lure of investigating the complex conjuncture of these issues in relation to media fascination with sports stars. Now that I have completed my thesis, I would like to consider future research in this area. During the coverage of Olympic women's basketball, reporters announced that there are two professional women's leagues being formed in North America. As a result, mainstream media will negotiate discourses of nationalism, consumption, gender and sexuality while representing star figures such as Lisa Leslie or Rebecca Lobo as well as their "butchy" supporting cast.

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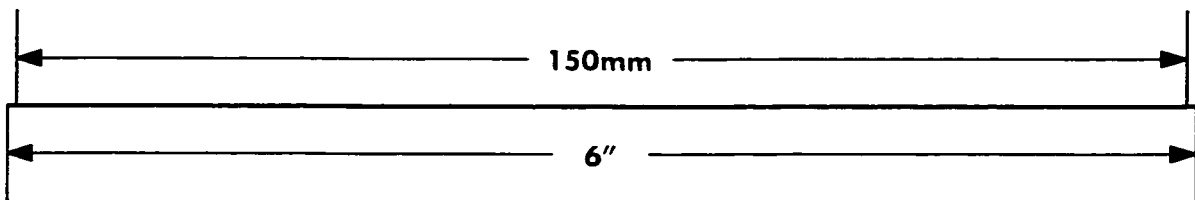
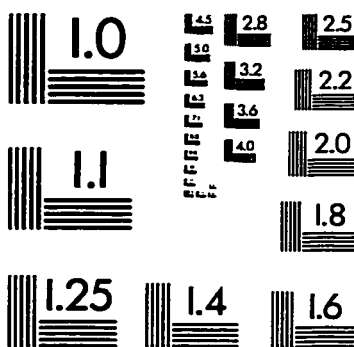
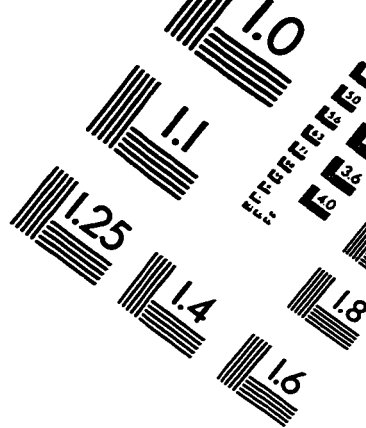
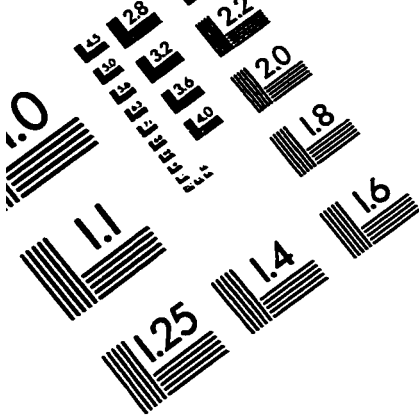
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